

WOMEN AND THE HOLOCAUST: NEW PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

Edited by
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WOMEN AND THE HOLOCAUST: NEW PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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The conference started as Katarzyna Pabijanek’s idea, who together with Monika Rudaś-Grodzka, Katarzyna Nadana-Sokołowska, Agnieszka Zawadowska, Ewa Serafin, and Agnieszka Wróbel from Gender Center Foundation and the Institute for Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences organized the conference and raised funding. The organizers were greatly aided by a host of volunteers working during the conference.

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Introduction

ANDREA PETÖ, LOUISE HECHT,
KAROLINA KRASUSKA

The volume *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges* uses recent developments in gender studies to expand the existing scholarship on women and the Holocaust with specific emphasis on Central and East-Central Europe. While gender theory updates the analytical frameworks, the previously unexamined textual archive of this region produces new connecting lines between “women” and the Holocaust. Together they lead us to rethink the various levels of how the category of “gender” matters in Holocaust research in all parts of Europe and beyond.

Central and East-Central Europe and Holocaust Research

In his influential book *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Larry Wolff claims that the line between East and West in the minds of Enlightenment philosophers approximately converged with the border between the Eastern and the Western block, after World War II. He was convinced that because of its notorious history, the coercive mind-mapping of the Enlightenment that defined the “barbaric East” as the indispensable counterpart of Western civilization would “certainly outlive the collapse of Communism, surviving in the public culture and its mental maps.”¹ During the

¹ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 4.

last twenty-five years the majority of intellectuals and politicians in the former communist countries have worked hard to prove Larry Wolff wrong and struggled for a reconceptualization of Europe. In many respects, the process in which post-communist societies have attempted to come to terms with the memory of the Holocaust seems to be the touchstone for those societies' "return" to Europe, i.e. their triumph over Enlightenment's coercive mind-mapping.

In general, historical memory provides an effective tool for critically examining mental maps. Like many others before them, John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, the editors of the volume *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (2013) argue that the "Holocaust came to occupy a centerstage position in ethical thinking about the modern world"; thus, they embarked upon the comprehensive and systematic presentation of the subject in all post-communist countries, from Albania to Slovenia.² In the view of the editors' detailed and sensitive approach, two of their assumptions seem remarkable. By claiming that the cohesiveness of their volume could be attributed to the "relative unity of the situation of the postcommunist reception of the Holocaust," Himka and Michlic merely reproduced the ideological postulates of their predecessor, David S. Wyman's 1996 volume *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, who claimed that "these countries all followed the Soviet Union's approach to the Holocaust."³ While this line of thinking suggests ideological conformity in historical memory in post-communist countries, their second assumption refers to historical events and stresses "the *messiness* of actual historical experience" in the "East";

² John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, "Introduction," in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, eds. John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 3.

³ Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 12. David S. Wyman, "Introduction," in *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, ed. David S. Wyman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), xxi.

whereas people could be neatly categorized into victims, perpetrators, and bystanders in the “West,” the situation in the “East” was, according to them, considerably more complex.⁴ A brief look at Henri Rousso’s *The Vichy Syndrome* or Vicky Carron’s *Uneasy Asylum* on the history and memory of World War II in France as well as on debates in the Netherlands, Italy, and other “Western” countries since the 1980s might suffice to undermine clear-cut regional divisions.⁵ Rather than confirming historical facts, Himka’s and Michlic’s categorizations thus seem to corroborate Larry Wolff’s hypothesis about the continuity of coercive mind-mapping.

The call for papers for the Warsaw 2011 conference, where the papers of this volume were first presented, stated that the organizers aimed at promoting the debate on “Women and the Holocaust” in Central Europe, while explicitly excluding Germany and Austria.⁶ Hence, the concept of Central (and East-Central) Europe used to delineate the geographical borders of our subject approximately corresponds to the “East”/“West” divide outlined by Wolff. Instead of substantiating this division, however, our limitation to Central and East-Central Europe seeks to prove that the historical developments and debates in this constructed geographical space are essentially compatible with the “West.” According to our opinion, the “return” to Europe of the former communist countries shall neither be effected by highlighting differences nor by glossing them over, but by providing a carefully crafted corpus of studies that allows for seeing parallels between “East” and “West” without dismissing (national) dissimilarities.

⁴ Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 4; emphasis added.

⁵ Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1991). The book was originally published in 1987; Vicky Carron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); cf. e.g. Debórah Dwork and Robert-Jan van Pelt, “The Netherlands,” in *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, 45-77.

⁶ We shall not venture to discuss the ideologically highly charged term “Central Europe,” neither to delineate its eastern border.

Gendering the Holocaust

Similar efforts to challenge received knowledge inspired scholars to gender Holocaust research. Scholars like Sara Horowitz set out two aims for those undertaking gender analyses of the Holocaust: “recovering the experiences of women and reshaping or nuancing Holocaust memory.”⁷ The first approach – “recovering the experiences of women” – seeks to gather the lost and neglected stories of the Holocaust; the second focuses on the framework, or rather settings, in which these stories are situated. The archeological work of recovering what has not been seen is well-advanced – several prominent works of recent decades as well as the recent exhibition *Spots of Light – Women in the Holocaust* at Israel’s Holocaust Memorial Yad Vashem have addressed the lost experiences of women. This epistemological approach tries to describe what has happened. As Sara Horowitz points out, historians “examine documentary, and sometimes physical, evidence to determine what was done to whom by whom, when, and how.”⁸ The second task, delineated by Horowitz, is focused theoretically. Here we are to ask how different cultural forms of Holocaust memory use traditional notions of gender. This attempt makes the work of historians more diverse and complex. Horowitz’s interest “in shapes and texture of memories of survivors, in the differences between the recollections of women and of men, in the images and tropes that have emerged in over half-century of representing the Holocaust” is also an agenda this collection is aiming to follow.⁹

In order to amend current conceptions of the geographical paradigm, as well as of the gendered approach to the Holocaust, revisionism seems to be an adequate tool. Aviezer Tucker’s typology

⁷ Sara R. Horowitz, “Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory,” *Prooftexts* 20, no. 1/2 (2000): 176.

⁸ Horowitz, “Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory,” 163.

⁹ Ibid.

defines three strategies for historical revisionism.¹⁰ The first one is *significance-driven* revisionism when there is a major change in what historians find significant in history. The second one is *evidence-driven* revisions: when new evidence is discovered. And third one is *value-driven* revisionism: when historical events and processes are reevaluated due to a new system of values becoming hegemonic. A gendered history of the Holocaust is a revisionist history writing, which is strongly connected to all three types of revisionisms.

Adopting the current approaches to gender studies and focusing on the texts and contexts from Central and East-Central Europe, this collection aims to contribute to the rich history of researching the Holocaust in a critical way. The impact of the Holocaust on gender roles has already been noticed during the war.¹¹ Also women's role in memorial projects was emphasized immediately after the end of WWII.¹² Systematic research on women and the Holocaust, however, developed since 1983 when Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz organized the first conference on women and the Holocaust in the United States. At that conference, Joan Ringelheim argued eloquently that in failing to recognize that men and women suffered differently we "lose the lives of women for a second time."¹³ A strong professional alliance was built up

¹⁰ Aviezer Tucker, "Historiographic Revision and Revisionism," in *Past in Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe*, ed. Michal Kopecek, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 1-15.

¹¹ Ringelblum's *Oyneg Shabbes* study plan proposed to analyze how the war changed traditional gender roles, see: Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabbes Archive* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 241-242.

¹² Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, "The Identity of Women in Sher'erit Hapletha: Personal and Gendered Identity as Determinants in Rehabilitation, Immigration and Resettlement," in *Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities*, eds. Dalia Ofer, Francoise S. Ouzan and Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (Oxford, New York: Bergahn Books, 2012), 16-45, esp. 29.

¹³ Robin Ruth Linden, *Making Stories, Making Selves: Feminist Reflections on the Holocaust* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993).

between the so-called second wave of the women's movement and those who wanted to rewrite or revise women's history.¹⁴ The scholarship on women and the Holocaust followed the same epistemological route as women's history writing in general. Scholars started to collect the facts and evidence making women visible – and covering such topics as, for example, the history of women in the ghettos and of their participation in the Jewish resistance movements. Yet, scholars in the field were also asking a “different question” about the Holocaust – to use Matsuda's term.¹⁵ The 1986 conference “Autobiographies, Biographies, and Life Histories of Women: Interdisciplinary Perspectives” may have been a starting point for such an analysis. The organizers of this conference, The Personal Narrative Group, published *Interpreting Women's Lives* stating that they aimed to work against the traditional construction that viewed men's experiences as normative and exemplary, and to create a more inclusive narrative strategy, a value driven revisionism.¹⁶

The literature on gender and the Holocaust still suffers from the negative consequences of the equality-difference debate, a debate that was one of the main flashpoints in feminist theory in the 1990s. On the one hand, in the research on the Holocaust and gender men and women have been considered a unified Jewish subject – the victims, resisters, and survivors of the same murderous regime. On the other hand, in this scholarship Jewish women became marked as maternal and sexual bodies, who represent women's difference, which led to emphasizing the uniquely female experiences of sexual assault, pregnancy, menstruation, prostitution etc. Of course, this latter approach, as Horowitz points

¹⁴ See: Andrea Peto, “Writing Women's History in Eastern Europe. Towards a “Terra Cognita?”” *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (2004): 173–183.

¹⁵ Mari J. Matsuda, “Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory out of Coalition,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1183–1192.

¹⁶ Personal Narratives Group. *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

out “runs the risk of viewing women only as objects of a particular subset of genocidal practices connected to biological functions: for example, pregnancy, motherhood and sexual violation.”¹⁷ It is no surprise then that some Holocaust scholars distance themselves from the idea of looking at Jewish women as if they were “only” the victims of sexism; they argue for the equality of Jewish suffering. Or they demand that attention be given to gender differences when studying the Holocaust in “ideological” terms with the aim of raising consciousness.¹⁸ For example, Lawrence Langer strongly opposed making a distinction between men and women generally claiming that to do so banalizes the Holocaust. According to Langer, differentiating between victims is a distraction from the Nazis’ goal of total annihilation.¹⁹

Another critique of this approach to women and the Holocaust may be advanced from the perspective of the recently developing men’s or masculinity studies. Scholars point out that Jewish men also suffered the same bodily humiliations, which scholars of women’s studies and the Holocaust claim as their own.²⁰ We might well agree with Horowitz again who suggests that what we need to do is to “explore the place of gender for what it can teach us about the Shoah.”²¹ This is especially relevant because there is another significant group of scholars who are reluctant to contribute to the study of “women and the Holocaust.” Some gender theorists are concerned about the “women and the Holocaust” approach as

¹⁷ Horowitz, “Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory,” 177.

¹⁸ Ibid., 181.

¹⁹ See the oft-quoted words of Langer about non-comparability of suffering of mothers to fathers, in the path breaking book edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman, who also contributed to this collection: Lawrence Langer, “Gendered Suffering. Women in Holocaust Testimonies,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 351-363.

²⁰ Stephen R. Haynes, “Ordinary Masculinity: Gender Analysis and Holocaust Scholarship,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 10, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 143-163.

²¹ Horowitz, “Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory,” 178.

an intellectual enterprise because, in their view, it reproduces gendered stereotypes about women and re-marginalizes women as one unified and essentialized group.

Gender analysis of the Holocaust should definitely not be what Horowitz called “domesticated *histoire des femmes*,” which lists where women were and what they did.²² One possible solution to the problem of inclusion is offered by social history within which gender is defined as the “social organization of difference.” In their pioneering work, Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman defined four structural sources for gender differences in the Holocaust, which may advance this framework: the prewar roles of Jewish men and women, anticipatory reactions, German policy and treatment of men and women, and the responses of Jewish men and women to Nazi persecution.²³ However useful this approach may be, it does not revise the leading analytical categories.

The aim of gendered Holocaust research should be to do nothing less than to interrogate its very assumptions: to ask what we think we know while acknowledging that our knowledge remains partial and incomplete and that, in Joan Scott words, we have “only paradoxes to offer.”²⁴ The gender analysis of the Holocaust is essential for three reasons. First, it focuses on the dynamics in historical processes and their role in production of gender. Second, it conceptually uses the concepts from feminist theory, continuously being inflected by and/or critically approaching its theoretical revisions and newest developments. Finally, it is analytically questioning normative positions, constantly contextualizing and interrogating the sedimented concepts of what we think is “feminine” and “masculine” in relation to other categories of difference.

²² Horowitz, “Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory.”

²³ Dalia Ofer, Lenore J. Weitzman, “Introduction: The Role of Gender in the Holocaust,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 1-19.

²⁴ See: Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

New Perspectives on “Women and the Holocaust”

The new challenges and approaches undertaken by the articles in this collection are determined precisely by the three coordinates delineated above. The major way of defamiliarizing the concept of gender is provided by the context of Central, respectively East-Central Europe, and the (gendered) national modes of remembering of the Holocaust in the countries in this region. This is especially important if we acknowledge that, as Sue Andrews suggests drawing on Claire Kahane, gender – a primary signifier marks “the response to the traumatic rupture as well as its *representation*.”²⁵ Numerous articles here then take into account the specific cultures of memory in post-communist Central Europe: they thematize communism both as a background for the rising possibility of (gender) research after the fall of the system, but also as a crucial framework for historical processes in the texts analyzed, which is the case especially in the texts by Dana Michăilescu, Hedwig Turai, and Monika Hanková.

The sedimented regulatory notions of gender are interrogated in the analyses within specifically delineated national settings, including the Czech/German (Hanková), Hungarian (Jeges; Turai), Hungarian/Austrian (Lappin-Eppel), Lithuanian (Malinauskaite), Polish/Israeli (Ubertowska), Romanian/US-American (Michăilescu), and Slovak (Vrzgulová). Together these texts provide a multiplicity of contexts in which what is hegemonic does not remain fully stable. This criticism of a unified notion of gender is only amplified by multiple disciplinary approaches: a particular discipline also shapes the way gender as a “category of knowledge” is

²⁵ Emphasis added. Sue Andrews, “Remembering the Holocaust – Gender Matters,” *Social Alternatives* 22, no. 2 (2003): 18. See also: Claire Kahane, “Dark Mirrors: A Feminist Reflection on Holocaust Narrative and the Maternal Metaphor,” in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 166-181.

conceptualized.²⁶ The collection features texts by historians – those active both in the academy and in museums, art historians, literary and film scholars, sociologists, ethnologists. They are engaged in the analysis of archival materials – including traditional and crucial archives for Holocaust memory, such as the Ringelblum archive, and newest digital archives – and representations in literature, film, art, as well as meta-thematic readings of scholarly texts.

The contributors represent different generations, some with more interest in identity politics, some rather focusing on constructions of subjectivity in an intersectional historical perspective. Despite talking about “Women and the Holocaust” we do not limit ourselves to specific women’s experiences, nor to texts by women alone or to phenomena coded as normatively “feminine.” The volume signals its roots in women’s studies, but expands into what gender studies have become today, critically incorporating the newest developments in gender theory, including masculinity and queer studies. The texts by Hedvig Turai and Edit Jeges explicitly refer to the theory of intersectionality, programmatically looking at the intersections of various social categories of difference which in this way create new gendered configurations. This perspective, however, is present on other levels in more texts in this collection: Bożena Karwowska brings up canonical texts by African-American authors, the hotbed of intersectionality in the 1980s; Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman develop their paper programmatically based on a multiplicity of femininities determined by various sociological coordinates; texts by Monika Vrzgulová and Edit Jeges feature the dimension of lesbian presences to add another layer to the study of “Women and the Holocaust.” Moreover, masculinity studies, one of the perspective the initial “women and the Holocaust” approach was criticized from, and their concepts give shape to the text by Bożena Karwowska and Aleksandra Ubertowska.

²⁶ See Christina von Braun and Inge Stephan, “Gender@Wissen,” in *Gender@Wissen: Ein Handbuch der Gender-Theorien*, eds. Christina von Braun and Inge Stephan, 3. ed. (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2013), 11–54.

The contributions in this volume are, then, not divided with regard to the disciplines they represented, nor to their national contexts, nor to the themes that they focus on. Rather, their groupings express the mode of how they broaden our knowledge about the gendered experience of the Holocaust. The first section “Framing Knowledge” includes two texts with a stronger theoretical emphasis. In their chapter “The Sequential Development of Jewish Women’s Coping Strategies (in the Ghettos) during the Holocaust: A New Theoretical Framework,” the pioneers in the field, Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman explore and relativize the aporias which, as they claim, are characteristic for “continuation” and “disrupture” approaches, most common in the historical research on gender and the Holocaust.²⁷ Accordingly, they propose to read their carefully selected case studies more effectively within the “sequential framework.” Bożena Karwowska’s “Women’s Luxury Items in Concentration Camps” has multiple broad theoretical inspirations, but centrally it explores the limits of comparison between captives – slaves and camp prisoners in relation to their bodies. From a broader perspective, the text resonates with the recent argument that African-American slaves were dehumanized and hence genderless, even if this question is not present there explicitly.²⁸ On a different plane, analyzing the perverse functions of the beautiful in the camps, Karwowska defamiliarizes our received knowledge about them.

²⁷ Natalia Aleksiu has recently suggested complicating the dichotomy between the “continuity” and the “disrupture” of gender roles by adding the categories of “class” and “age,” cf. Natalia Aleksiu, “Gender and the Daily Life of Jews in Hiding in Eastern Galicia,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* 27 (2014): 38–61.

²⁸ See: Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Sabine Broeck, “Enslavement as a Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology Through Black Feminist Critique,” *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* 22 (2008), <http://www.genderforum.org/issues/black-womens-writing-revisited/enslavement-as-regime-of-western-modernity/page/3/>.

The second section of the collection “Filling the Blanks” groups together the texts that revise the gendered history of the Holocaust mostly by supplying new evidence. The texts map out the questions of gender in underexplored archives and artistic representations from different Central European contexts. In the first chapter of this section, Eleonore Lappin-Eppel focuses on the testimonies of women survivors of the Strasshof transports from Hungary to Austria. As she demonstrates, the historically peculiar conditioning of this camp as a potential bargaining asset with Western allies in Himmler’s plans “allowed for a tenuous ‘normality,’” also in relation to gender roles, “because families and members of communities were kept together.” Monika Vrzgulová provides yet another insight into a different set of testimonies by women. In her chapter, she extensively quotes from and analyzes a video archive of the testimonies of the survivors in Slovakia she helped to establish in the mid-1990s as a part of a “rescue research,” thus providing more evidence about specifically women’s coping strategies during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Whereas Lappin-Eppel and Vrzgulová contributions read multiple testimonies to explore a specific set of historical circumstances, Monika Hanková explores in detail various identity coordinates performed within a set of texts around a single individual. Analyzing the case of K.P., a female doctor of medicine born in Karlsbad, she extends the research on the (gendered aspects of) discrimination that German Jews suffered within the (national) Czech context also after World War II. While extending our knowledge into previously underexplored contexts, the last chapter in this section is located at the intersection of the historical and artistic. Hedvig Turai in her “Intersection of Erasures in Hungarian Art History: Erzsébet Schaár” de-universalizes the narrative around this Hungarian artist highlighting the previously muted aspect of her gendered Jewish identity performance.

Finally, the texts in the third section of the volume “Comparing (Con)texts” share an epistemological approach to the material analyzed, which is explicitly comparative. Consequently,

the analysis becomes more dynamic and the claims made do not try to engage in misleading universalisms and gain an additional dimension of specificity and significance. Aleksandra Ubertowska's contribution explores in parallel two narratives of heroic Jewishness at the time of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising written by two authors who were a married couple: Cywia Lubetkin and Icchak Cukierman, also known by their anglicized names as Zivia Lubetkin and Yitzhak Zuckerman. In her dense textual analysis, she traces the differences between Lubetkin's and Cukierman's memoirs and the gendered conventions of autobiographical writing, but also the power of social gender norms. Whereas Ubertowska focuses on different textual renditions of parallel events, Dana Mihăilescu analyzes the shift in gendered experiences and/or memorial cultures in different political and/or national contexts that shape a single memoir, Anca Vlasopolos's *No Return Address*. This approach enables her to shed new light on the shift from the pro-Nazi to a communist regime in Romania, but also to illustrate a tenuous subject position of a female Eastern European immigrant within the incipient Holocaust memorial culture in the US. The two last contributions focus on the comparisons of the transmission of memory in different media. Gintare Malinauskaite explores the possibilities and limitations of Holocaust memory in both documentary and feature films. Specifically, her text focuses on the contemporary documentary films around the prominent female fighters of the Vilna Ghetto and a narrative film *Ghetto*, with its female protagonist based on the ghetto singer Liuba Levitska, thus revealing what in these two genres is within the realm of (gendered) representation. Edit Jeges's text engages in a narrative displacement that is conditioned both by the specific historical context and the medium, through which the memories are represented. Her text approaches Olga Lengyel's memoir written in the 1940s and her video testimony given half a century later showing how gendered assumptions have changed in time and through a medium.

With all of its contributions, this book presents the current state of scholarship (mostly) in post-communist countries of Central and East-Central Europe, and helps identifying future research directions. Scholars in and of this region have become increasingly sensitive to the intersection of gender with other differences, open to explore new topics and use interdisciplinary methods in order to revise Holocaust narratives along values, significance, and evidence. Within the broader geo-political context, however, this project aims at transcending the “East”/“West” divide that Larry Wolff outlined by demonstrating that the Holocaust experience and its memory are influenced by national and/or ideological discourses but should not be limited to them. Just as the “messiness” of the historical experience reigns on both sides of the former Iron Curtain so does scholarly sophistication that tries to make sense of it.

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Framing Knowledge

The Sequential Development of Jewish Women's Coping Strategies (in the Ghettos) During the Holocaust: A New Theoretical Framework

LENORE J. WEITZMAN AND DALIA OFER

This article analyzes the apparent contradiction between two commonly used portraits of Jewish women's behavior during the Holocaust and proposes a new framework for incorporating both of them into a more sequential theory of women's responses.¹ It begins with a brief review of the scholarly literature that, as we see it, implicitly employs two different "frameworks" or theories for explaining women's behavior. The titles for these frameworks are our own and have not previously been used in the literature. The first framework, what we call the "continuity framework," is based on the perceived continuity between women's pre-war roles and their responses during the Holocaust. The second framework, what we call the "disrupture framework," is based on the lack of continuity between women's pre-war roles and their behavior during the Holocaust. Our aim here is twofold. First, we want to introduce readers who are new to this field to the prior literature. Second, we want to introduce scholars who are already well-versed in this literature to what we now see – but had not seen before we began

¹ We are grateful to our colleague and friend Michlean Amir of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., who provided critical assistance with this paper.

to work on this article – as an underlying tension between these two theories in the current literature. Following this introduction, we present our own framework, what we call the “sequential framework,” which we believe provides a more powerful model for understanding women’s responses during the Holocaust.

The next section of this paper “tests” the usefulness of these three frameworks by examining four case studies. Here we follow four women through the Holocaust and examine the extent to which each framework helps us to understand and explain their experiences, behavior, and coping strategies. These case studies were chosen to include women of different ages, backgrounds, and social class. At the same time, we limited the time-frame and context to the ghetto period, so that we could look at experiences under roughly similar external circumstances. Finally, we conclude this article with an overview of the implications of these case studies for our theory and invite you, the reader, to use the sequential framework and to help us develop it more systematically.

The Two Traditional Models: The Continuity Versus the Disruption of Gendered Roles

THE CONTINUITY OF GENDERED BEHAVIOR

The most commonly used and most well-documented model for understanding women’s experiences during the Holocaust has been what we call the model of gender continuity – the large body of scholarship that links women’s responses during the Holocaust to their pre-war roles as mothers, wives, and homemakers. This scholarship shows how homemaking, nurturing, and mothering skills were translated into coping strategies during the Holocaust. It is reflected in the important academic contributions of two generations of scholars – in a wide variety of settings.

The compelling logic of this framework is illustrated by Marion Kaplan’s description of the coping strategies of Jewish women in

Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Kaplan shows how women called upon all of their pre-war gender skills to maintain their families. As she wrote, women were traditionally “supposed to make things work in the family and the household”²:

[T]hey mended and recycled clothing and honed their shopping skills to make frugal choices so the family could manage on less income; provided comfort and support for their frightened children coping with new harassment at school, and continued to offer encouragement and solace to their frustrated and depressed husbands who were dismissed from their jobs.³

We find a similar emphasis on the continuity of these gender-based skills in the literature on the ghettos. In fact, diaries from different ghettos converge in telling the same “iconic” stories about the devoted Jewish mother who saved the one bowl of soup she was given at work to bring home to share with her children. For example, 14 year old Dawid Sierakowiak in the Łódź ghetto wrote (in his diary) about the great sense of relief he felt when his sister got a job and his mother would no longer feel compelled to share her soup with her daughter: “I am extremely glad that Nadzia (his sister) now has a job, and that she [receives] 1 deca of bread and 5 decas of sausage. Now Mom has her soup all to herself.”⁴ Similarly it is

² Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54.

³ Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*, 54; Marion Kaplan “Keeping Calm and Weathering the Storm: Jewish Women’s Responses to Daily Life in Nazi Germany,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1998), 42-43. In other sections of her work, Kaplan also illustrates the second framework discussed below.

⁴ Dawid Sierakowiak: *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Łódź Ghetto*, ed. Alan Adelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 149, (March 23, 1942 entry); see also, Perez Opochinsky, *Reshimot megetto Warsaw* (Hebrew) (Sketches from the Warsaw Ghetto) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz hamehuchad, 1970), 184-191; the description of F1 the woman mentioned in the Slepak research is telling, Ringelblum Archive ARI/49.

common to read about mothers who invented recipes for potato peels and other scraps of food to create meals for their children, or who knitted scarves from old garments to sell in the ghetto, or traded other textiles for food through the walls of the ghetto.⁵

When we turn to the literature on the camps, even though we are talking about drastically different contexts, we find similar linkages between women's pre-war skills as homemakers, mothers, and caretakers, and their coping strategies in the camps. For example, Ruth Bondy observed the contrast between the responses of men and women to the clothes that were randomly thrown to them after they were stripped of their personal belongings at Auschwitz-Birkenau (in 1943-44):

The men, in hats with cut off brims and in trousers and coats thrown to them at random – too short, too long, too wide, too small–looked like sad black storks. The women, also wearing garments that had been distributed to them at random, had somehow succeeded in only twenty-four hours in adjusting them to their bodies and sewing up the holes, using needles made of wooden splinters and threads pulled out of the one blanket allocated to them.⁶

Along the same lines, Felicia Karay also observed the usefulness of women's traditional concern with maintaining their personal appearance and clothing in a labor camp. She shows how their efforts to keep their bodies and hair clean, mend their clothing, weave some string into a belt, and fashion a collar from a rag, all had life-saving consequences because they made the women

⁵ Esther Lurie, YVA 03\637: 40, 118; see also Abraham Lewin, *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. Antony Polanski (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 85-86; Lewin describes the pain of mothers (but he is very critical of rich women who do not pay attention to the misery of the majority the poor.)

⁶ Ruth Bondy, "Women in Theresienstadt and the Family Camp in Birkenau," in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 323; Bondy also discusses the use of women's domestic skills as coping strategies in Theresienstadt.

look more “human” and that led their guards to treat them more humanely. For example, in describing the Skarzysko-Kamienna labor camp, Felicia Karay wrote:

The women paid more attention to personal hygiene than the men...kept their bodies and hair clean and mended their clothing.... This had major consequences.... [I]t strengthened the women’s will to cope...and avoid personal deterioration. In the factory, their nearly normal appearance induced their overseers to give them more assistance, subject to fewer beatings and, most important, treat them more humanely.⁷

Similarly, Myrna Goldenberg asserts that when women in the concentration camps recalled their pre-war roles in the kitchen and told each other stories of foods they cooked on Jewish holidays, these stories had an uplifting effect in recalling their positive pre-war self-images and a “satiating effect” in helping them cope with hunger.⁸

Finally, the research of Brana Gurewitsch points to the importance of the continuity in women’s mothering and caretaking roles in the concentration camps. In addition to the many practical ways that women helped their mothers, sisters, and daughters, Gurewitsch writes about the critical role of “camp sisters” (both real sisters and surrogate sister relationships formed in the camps) who cared about, assisted, and often tried to remain alive for each other.⁹ She suggests that the intense bonds of camp sisters were

⁷ Felicia Karay “Women in the Forced-Labor Camps,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 305.

⁸ Myrna Goldenberg, “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 327-339. See also Myrna Goldenberg, “Food Talk,” in *Experience and Expression*, eds. Elizabeth Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 161-189.

⁹ Brana Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), xviii-xix.

crucial in maintaining women's identities and "the will to live" in the midst of a system that was designed to destroy them. In short, this cursory review illustrates the substantial and persuasive body of literature that attests to the importance of the continuity model in helping us to understand women's responses during the Holocaust.

THE DISRUPTURE OF GENDERED BEHAVIOR

A second body of scholarship employs what we call the "disrupture framework" and challenges the continuity model by pointing to the dramatic ways in which Jewish women abandoned their pre-war roles, defied pre-war conventions, and engaged in activities that would have previously been unthinkable. This body of scholarship not only emphasizes the radical break from pre-war roles, some of it also challenges the assumption that women responded in gender-specific ways. Even more fundamentally, it challenges the "essentializing of gender" – i.e., that gender is the essential variable in understanding behavior – that is embedded in the continuity model.

One example of the discontinuity or disruption perspective is found in Dalia Ofer's account of normal law-abiding mothers in the Warsaw ghetto who became food smugglers after they had failed to find other ways to feed their children.¹⁰ Drawing on interviews conducted by Cecilia Slepak, a journalist whom Ringelblum commissioned to do a study of women in the Warsaw ghetto, Ofer writes that many women felt that the only way that they could cope with the deteriorating situation was to turn to unconventional behavior.¹¹ For example, Ofer discusses Mrs. R3 (all of the

¹⁰ Dalia Ofer, "Gender Issues in Diaries and Testimonies of the Ghetto," in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 143-167; Dalia Ofer, "Her View through My Lens: Cecilia Slepak Studies Women in Warsaw," in *Gender, Place, and Memory in the Modern Jewish Experience*, eds. Judy Tydor Baumel and Tova Cohen (London, Portland, OR: Valentine Mitchell, 2003), 29-50.

¹¹ Cecilia Slepak's conducted interviews with 16 women in the Warsaw ghetto between December 1941 and the spring of 1942. Her research was

women were identified by only the first letter of their name) who was the wife of an independent printer from Warsaw and the mother of two unmarried sons. Until the outbreak of war, Mrs. R3 had run the home and had taken care of her sons' education. After her husband's business was confiscated and the family was moved to the ghetto, the burden of providing for the family fell on Mrs. R3's shoulders. She understood that selling household items would shortly bring the family to the brink of starvation. She therefore used a connection to get a job as superintendent of one of the apartment buildings on Leszno Street – a position that commanded a monthly salary of fifty zloty, paid by the Judenrat. Mrs. R3's organizing abilities then became even more apparent. She proved to be extremely hard-working in her new job, working each day from 5:30 a.m. until late in the evening. She maintained a clean and well-run building, and kept beggars, thieves and other intruders far away – assisted in all these tasks by her two sons and, occasionally, by her husband. Slepak goes further in describing Mrs. R3's energy: she not only assisted her own family and the tenants in her building, but also helped other people in the ghetto who could take advantage of the location of her apartment building.¹²

The pattern of women venturing far beyond their pre-war roles is also found in Lenore Weitzman's work on the *kashariyot* – the women couriers in the Jewish underground – who took on dangerous undercover assignments, such as smuggling arms, which would have seemed inconceivable to them before the war.¹³

done as part of the large research on ghetto life initiated by the Ringelblum archive team. Her research is divided into a number of bands. Her subjects are identified only by an initial. For more information on Cecilia Slepak see, Dalia Ofer and Paula Hyman eds., *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2007); Ofer, "Her View through my Lens," 29-50.

¹² Slepak research, YVA, ARI\49 band 5.

¹³ Lenore J. Weitzman, "Women of Courage in the Jewish Resistance," in *Lessons & Legacies*, ed. Jeff Diefendorf (Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2004), 112-152; Lenore J. Weitzman "The Kashariyot (Couriers) in

The discontinuity framework also seems more appropriate in accounting for the fearless combat activities of women fighters in the Jewish resistance in the ghettos, such as Zivia Lubetkin and Frumka Plotnitzka, and for those who became partisans in the forests, such as Rozka Korczak and Vitka Kempner.¹⁴ In these portraits of women's coping strategies, the women's traditional gender roles appear to be anachronistic vestiges that are easily abandoned. For example, as Faye Schulman wrote, she herself was surprised at how easily – and happily – she adapted to wielding a rifle when she was in the partisans:

I never dreamed that I would be thinking like this... [but] that a rifle was my friend.... Now if the enemy pointed his gun on me, I would shoot back.... I could avenge the blood of my mother, my father, my sisters.... A rifle was like a passport among the partisans. As long as the war continued, I would never part with it.¹⁵

Of course, not all of these role disruptions were “heroic.” Some were considered shameful and were therefore reported less frequently, such as reports of women who abandoned their pre-war roles as mothers and neglected, or abused, or physically abandoned

the Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust,” in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, eds. Paula Hyman and Dalia Ofer, n.p.

¹⁴ Belah Guterman, *Tzviaha-ahatsipurh ayeahshel Tsivyah Lubetkin* (The Only Tzvia: The Life Story of Tzvia Lubetkin) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, Yad Vashem, 2011); Naomi Shimshi, “Frumka Plotnitzka: Dror Hehalutz Polin,” (Hebrew) (Frumka Plotnitzka: Dror hehalutz in Poland), in *Guf shlishi yahid* (Third Person Personal), eds. Avihu Ronen and Yehoyakim Cochavi (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1995), 165-220; Miri Frielich, *Hapartizanit: sipur hayeah shel Vitka Kovner* (The Partisan: The Life Story of Vitka Kovner) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2013).

¹⁵ Faye Schulman, *A Partisan's Memoir: Woman of the Holocaust* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995), 99-100; see also, Lenore J. Weitzman, “Jewish Women in the Soviet Partisans,” paper presented at the International Workshop on Soviet Partisans and the Holocaust at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel, January 14, 2014.

their children.¹⁶ In addition, one can point to testimonies about the decidedly non-feminine behavior of many Jewish kapos in the concentration camps.¹⁷ But whether we label them positive or negative, it is evident that these breaks with traditional female roles clearly challenge the universal applicability of the continuity framework.

OUR MODEL: THE SEQUENTIAL FRAMEWORK

Before we move to describe the mode of analysis we suggest, it is important to note that even if these two models appear to be inherently contradictory, it is evident that both are employed by a number of the authors cited above in different parts of their work. And we agree that both perspectives may be useful. In fact, the two do not have to be seen as inherently contradictory if we conceptualize the two types of women's responses as occurring sequentially, at different points in time and as a response to different experiences. We have incorporated this perspective into a third overarching framework, which we call the "sequential framework." This framework allows us to follow sequential changes in women's behavior over time, and directs us to observe and track the shifts in women's coping strategies through the course of the Holocaust.

It may be heuristically useful to think about women's coping strategies as a three-stage process. In the first stage, at the start

¹⁶ Dalia Ofer, "Motherhood under Siege," in *Life, Death, and Sacrifice: Women and Family in the Holocaust*, ed. Esther Hertzog (Jerusalem, New York: Gefen Publishing, 2008), 41-67; see also how neglected children were when their mother had to leave the home for work, YVA M-10 ARI/196, Maluba Regina, "A Report of One Medical Treatment."

¹⁷ Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003), 172-174; Naanma Shick, *Bezrichot sketot meod: nashim yehudiot benchane asuschwit Birkenau, 1942-1945* (Very Silent Screams: Jewish Women in Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration and Extermination Camp, 1942-1945) (PhD dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 2010), 76, note 216, 81, 141, 164, 180, these relate to examples where women kapos were extremely cruel.

of the Nazi assault, we suggest that most women utilized their accustomed ways of behaving, ways that were anchored in pre-war gender roles: they instinctively respond by trying to continue to fulfill their prescribed roles as loving mothers, homemakers, nurturers, and caretakers. However, as Nazi measures against the Jews intensified, and as new restrictions not only constrained women's traditional activities, but also endangered their very existence, some women turned to non-traditional ways of coping. For example, as noted above, a number of the women in the Warsaw ghetto began to engage in smuggling as a way to provide food for their families.

At first they may have used their old "vocabulary" to explain what they were doing – i.e., mothers were always trying to find ways to get more food for their children and smuggling was "just" a way of providing that food. It was an extension of their responsibility as mothers. At this stage they did not see smuggling as a radical change in their behavior. But looking back with the benefit of hindsight, we see conventional, law-abiding women suddenly engaging in very dangerous illegal activities that they would have previously considered taboo. In addition, we see it as a radical first step that opened a new arena for them: it expanded the ways in which they perceived their possibilities for survival. However, in this in-between stage they may not have realized the change or even thought about it. Or they may not have had the ideology or framework to acknowledge the very real change in their behavior.

But, at some point, many women (but certainly not all) reached a "tipping point" that propelled a change in their perspective, their vocabulary, and their embrace of new activities as a reflection of "the new me" – as a kind of a new identity as a person, as did the women fighters and commanders in the Jewish resistance.¹⁸

¹⁸ The term "tipping point" became well-known in the United States as a result of Malcolm Gladwell's bestselling book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Little Brown, 2000). The concept was first used in sociology by Morton Grodzins, who

In some cases there was a specific event (such as the Germans killing their brother, or mother, or their hearing about the mass killings) that impelled a radical change of reference, a new perspective, and new behavior all at once. In other cases it was the culmination of daily deprivations, and the gradual erosion of all semblance of normal life, that became so overwhelming that they had to do something drastic such as trying to escape from the ghetto to live on the Aryan side, or deciding to trust a non-Jewish family to hide their child. Clearly, not everyone made a conscious “decision,” nor followed a linear path, nor engaged in non-conventional behavior, nor engaged in it consistently. But we believe we can discern a common pattern among a large number of women who responded to the Nazi assault in non-gendered ways.

Before we proceed, it is important to add two caveats. First, we want to underscore the fact that we recognize that many women did not, and probably could not, follow this path. When one reads testimonies of the intense hunger and widespread starvation in places like the Łódź and Warsaw ghettos (where, for example, over twenty percent of the combined population died in a single year, between 1941 and 1942, mostly because of starvation and exhaustion), it is clear that the odds were stacked against anyone being able to do anything to improve their situation, and many were forced to “accept” that fate.¹⁹ However, we are arguing that even if they failed, this framework helps us to better understand the struggles in which many women were engaged. Second, we are not asserting that this framework was

studied the point at which white families decided to move out of their neighborhood when “too many black families moved in (in the 1960’s), then by the family sociologist Jessie Bernard (explaining the decision to divorce (in the 1970s), and by the Nobel prize winning economist Thomas Schelling (in the 1970s)).

¹⁹ Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer “Life in the Ghettos,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 104, citing Israel Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939-1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 64.

or is restricted to the behavior of Jewish women: it could also help us understand some of the responses of Jewish men – and those of non-Jewish women.²⁰

Four Case Studies: Applying the Sequential Framework

As noted above, the following cases were selected to represent a variety of types of women in the ghetto period with respect to age, family background, and social economic class. Because of space, this section is limited to only four cases. We believe, however, that the following four women typify common types of women in the ghettos: a housewife and mother who loses her husband and is left to raise her six children alone; a student who was active in her youth group and was still in school when the war began; a young married woman who was working before the war (and continued to work in the ghetto); and, finally, an older married woman whose children were married, and who was herself both a refugee and an active volunteer in self-help organizations. These women represent a range of ages – from a student to a grandmother, and a range of occupational statuses – from a non-working student to a housewife and mother, to a working woman, to an older woman volunteer. They also represent a range of socio-economic statuses – from a family that almost starved to death to one with some economic resources. Two of them were murdered in the Holocaust. The other two survived.

With respect to sources, for each case we draw on as many sources as possible including dairies and other materials they and

²⁰ For example, in *Hitler's Furies* Wendy Lower argues that the German women who became active participants in the German genocide started out in traditional women's jobs (as nurses, school teachers, secretaries, etc.) that, over time, placed them in situations where their opportunities for advancement led to their active participation in the murder of the Jews. Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

others wrote at the time or soon afterwards, archival materials from other contemporaries such as Emanuel Ringelblum, Cecilia Slepak, Mordechai Tennenbaum-Tamaroff (three contemporaries who did not survive); as well as testimonies, interviews, memoirs, and books written in later years. In each case we tried to integrate the information from these various sources. We are aware of the subjectivity of some of these sources and the problem of looking at the past through the lens of the present. This, however, is a problem that is faced by all historians and social scientists who deal with the past: we tried to be as faithful as possible to the period by corroborating these accounts with other sources written at the time and subsequent research on the ghettos. We are also aware of the fact that in some cases our direct sources are limited, and we have therefore made an extra effort to verify and contextualize the narratives that we present.

MALKA SELVER –
HEAD OF A FAMILY IN THE ŁÓDŹ GHETTO

We know Malka Selver (1900(?)-1944) through the detailed memoir of her daughter, Sara Selver-Urbach, who chronicled the family's experiences in the Łódź ghetto in the book *Through the Window of My Home*.²¹ According to this text, before the Holocaust Malka was happily married with six children: four boys and two girls. Her daughter Sara described her as “pretty and petite” and totally feminine, with a lovely face that glowed with happiness.”²² She had beautiful manners, and was exceedingly careful in carrying out every religious ritual. But she was also a modern woman with an education and a “free spirit” who loved reading and going to the movies. Most important was her

²¹ Sara Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window of My Home* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1986), originally published in 1964 in Hebrew. All of the following page references are to the 1986 paperback edition published by Yad Vashem.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

husband Isaiah: her love for him was “truly boundless” and he returned her love fully.²³

There was a clear division of labor between Malka and Isaiah. Isaiah was solely responsible for the family’s economic support. Isaiah worked as a bookkeeper, but also devoted himself to the study of the Torah, and the rhythm of their family life was determined by his Judaism. Sara recalls his soulful melodies filling and enveloping their days and nights.²⁴ But once the German army occupied Łódź in September 1939, Isaiah lost his job and had little success in finding other ways of supporting his family. In the piercing cold winter of 1940, they could not afford to heat their three room apartment and had to move into a single room. Sara described those days as “bleak and filled with anxiety” with Malka showing signs of the physical strain: she lost weight and frequently had to lie down because of migraine headaches.²⁵ Sara, then 17, assumed her mother’s tasks and managed their home.²⁶

By March 1940 the family, along with all the Jews of Łódź, were forced to move into the ghetto. Isaiah managed to find them a one room apartment of their own, and started to sneak out of the ghetto at dusk, at high-risk, with a bundle hidden under his clothes, to trade with Poles. His face grew more haggard from day to day, and once he was almost caught. Soon he came down with influenza, and that developed into pneumonia. Despite Malka’s efforts to nurse him, he died a few days later.²⁷ The family was devastated by his death. Malka kept sobbing, dazed with grief, and her daughter felt as if her “mother had also died.”²⁸ She went through the motions of finding ways to feed her children but it was as if her life was over. She merely existed – and solely for her

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵ Ibid., 32-34.

²⁶ Ibid.; on the conduct of children in the family in the ghettos see, Lenore J. Weitzman “Role Reversals,” paper presented at Brandeis conference on the family in the Holocaust, April 2010.

²⁷ Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window of My Home*, 41-42.

²⁸ Ibid., 45

children. In fact, the whole family seemed “so numbed by grief that they were “incapable of exerting the energy to face...their growing hardships.”²⁹

In the summer of 1940, an epidemic of dysentery spread through the ghetto and everyone in Malka's family became ill. At first, when her oldest son, Fulek, became sick, Malka nursed him day and night. But then Malka herself got sick, and had to rely on her children to nurse her. A visiting doctor insisted that Malka be sent to the hospital. While she was gone her youngest daughter contracted pneumonia and died in the arms of her 14 year old brother David. When Malka returned from the hospital she was still ill (and depressed) and confined to bed. Her children continued to be her caretakers and nurses. Given the fact that she was too ill to provide for them, they took on the task of obtaining food as well, however, they were not very good at it and the family was soon in “dire circumstances.”³⁰ At this point it seemed as if Malka simply could not protect or provide for her children in the horrendous circumstances of the Łódź ghetto where thousands of people were starving to death.³¹ But Malka made a great effort to recover, and by the end of the summer of 1940 she opened a small vegetable stall using the front window of their apartment. Although it only lasted for a few months, and was not very successful, it provided them with something to eat.

The most significant improvement in the family's material circumstances occurred two months later when a handicapped neighbor hired Malka to shop and cook for her – and paid her generously.³² She also allowed Malka to take home leftover food so all of her children had something to eat. While their good fortune was at first tinged with the “shame at eating leftovers,” Malka's practical attitude won out. From then on, Malka was the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 52

³¹ On the illness in the Łódź ghetto see, Michal Unger, *Łódź: The Last Ghetto in Poland* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), 364.

³² Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window of My Home*, 66-67.

primary breadwinner and she once again assumed the authority and leadership of the family. One of the many previously unimaginable decisions she made at that time was when her son David contracted pleurisy, she brought non-kosher meat into the house – just for David – for his health. Although Jewish religious law not only permits but actually prescribes doing that to save a life, it was nevertheless a very difficult decision for a deeply religious and observant woman. But she preserved the health of her family until the winter of 1942, when a typhoid epidemic swept through the ghetto and all of them “fell ill, one after another, suffering fits of violent shivering.”³³ Malka nursed them “night and day.”³⁴ Through these events, her children gained a new appreciation for their mother’s strength and bravery. As Sara wrote:

Mother withstood everything.... When the regular distribution of rations was cut off entirely, mother would get us a loaf of bread by standing on a number of queues simultaneously and rushing from one to the other, regardless of the constant, deadly dangerous ‘Aktionen’ that the Germans were conducting.³⁵

Later on, when Malka herself became seriously ill, her children mobilized to help her. They secretly traded their own rations for food they thought would help her. But, in the end, in the summer of 1944, when life in the Łódź ghetto descended into total chaos and no rations were distributed Malka and her children decided to volunteer to leave the ghetto on the next transport – to be “re-settled.”³⁶ They had no idea of what awaited them on the trains, or where they were being sent, and no idea that only Sara would survive the ordeal.

When we step back to analyze Malka Selver’s narrative, we see a woman who was left alone to care for her family after the death of her husband – against all odds. She did not have a vocation

³³ Ibid., 86

³⁴ Ibid., 85-86.

³⁵ Ibid., 120.

³⁶ Ibid., 121.

or a profession, and she did not have an effective social network or good “connections” with the authorities in the ghetto. In fact, because she had relied on her husband to deal with the world outside of the family, she felt completely helpless when he died and, at first, she retreated to her bed while her older children tried to manage as surrogate parents.

However, her responsibility as a mother forced her to draw on her inner strength and to overcome her depression and illness and to devise a strategy for her family’s survival. While that strategy kept evolving – from a not very successful effort to sell vegetables through the window of their home, to securing a job working for a wealthy disabled woman, she never gave up when something failed and she kept on trying. She also broke prior taboos – such as when she first gave her son non-kosher meat when she realized that it was his only hope for survival, and then gradually extended that to her other children when they were so weak. Similar transformations were common among other observant men and women when survival dictated giving up some religious practices.

In analyzing Malka’s behavior one might initially assume that she exemplified the “continuity model” because all of her extraordinary efforts were just extensions of her pre-war role as a mother and caretaker. However, we see her behavior as better understood within the sequential framework: despite the ups and downs that she experienced, and despite the fact that she sometimes had an uneasy relationship with her older children, she responded to each new challenge by taking a step that extended the borders of her previous activities and embarked on previously unthinkable courses of action to save her family. As we followed her development through multiple family crises, and as we marvel at her unswerving efforts to keep her family alive and cohesive, we see continuous changes in her personality and the roles she assumed that culminated in her emergence as the forceful and competent head of the family. It seems almost miraculous that this formerly dependent woman managed to keep her family alive – and together – and still

caring and supportive of each other until they made a collective decision to board the trains in the last stages of the Łódź ghetto.

SHULAMITH MOKARSKA –
A LEADER IN THE JEWISH SELF-HELP ORGANIZATIONS
IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

Shulamith Mokarska (1889-1942) was also from Łódź, but she escaped to Warsaw in the early days of the German occupation. One could, on the one hand, view her as a typical middle class Jewish housewife. On the other hand, Shulamith Mokarska was unusual because she became a leader in the Jewish self-help organization in Warsaw, despite the fact that she herself was a refugee.

The little information we have about Shulamith Mokarska is from three sources: first, Emanuel Ringelblum, the well-known historian who headed the Warsaw ghetto's secret Oneg Shabbat archive, wrote about her in his important article on the extinction of the Jewish intelligentsia in Warsaw. Second, her step-sister provided information to the Yad Vashem Pages of Testimony Project, a registry of victims of the Holocaust.³⁷ Finally, because she was active in self help organizations and the Łódź Landsmannschaft, we have some records of her activities from those sources. We know that she was married and the mother of two children: Michael and Roma, who were themselves married with children by the time the family arrived in Warsaw. The entire family was part of the massive deportations from the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1942 and they were murdered in Treblinka.

In the 1930s, Shulamith was actively involved in volunteer work to help poor families in Łódź, which was typical of many middle and upper middle class Jewish women in pre-war Poland.

³⁷ Emanuel Ringelblum, *Cetavim Acharonim: yanmar 1943-april 1944* (Last Writings, January 1943-April 1944, vol. 2) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1994), 34-35; *Yad Vashem Registry of Shoah Victims' Names*: Records #686680 and #738107 for Mokarska. In the following we will mention the source of information only for quotations.

She showed great care and compassion for these poor families and, along with others, initiated “house committees,” groups that worked within the apartment houses, as a way of organizing communal assistance. This work increased dramatically during the economic crises of the 1930s when Jewish organizations provided basic support for poorer Jewish women.³⁸

When she first came to Warsaw, Shulamith became involved in the Łódź Landsmannschaft – the organization of Jews from Łódź who were then living in Warsaw. The Landsmannschaft provided material assistance to Jews from Łódź. One may assume that because Shulamith was among the first wave of Jewish refugees who escaped from Łódź, and because her husband was a businessman, her family was able to take some of their possessions with them. Nevertheless, she was still a refugee. After they moved to the Warsaw ghetto Shulamith took on two new activities to help others. To improve the situation of refugees she worked on securing more aid for the children of the refugees, many of whom were already in refugee centers (known as the *punkten*, the Yiddish word for point). In addition, she organized other groups of women to become involved in the house committees. Eventually she became the head of the women’s section in ŻTOS or Żydowskie Towarzystwo Opieki Socjalnej (The Jewish Society for Social Aid), the body that coordinated the welfare work of the volunteer organizations in the ghetto.

The scale of Mokarska’s work was impressive because she recruited, inspired and empowered other women to help the poor. For example, she was among the women who initiated “women’s

³⁸ On the house committees in Warsaw ghetto, see David Ben Shalom, “Veadie habatim begeto Warsaw (The House Committees in the Warsaw Ghetto),” *Yalkut Moreshet* 61 (April 1996): 83-98; Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 91-92, 119-128; Ringelblum, *Last Writings*, 71-72, 77-78, it is part of the article of Ephraim Zagen and his role in the self-help organization.

patronage,” in the ghetto, an effort to enlist women from families that were still able to maintain some economic stability, to provide financial support and services to poor women, especially those with children. The patronage program not only collected financial contributions from the well-to-do women in the ghetto, they also negotiated for more support from other organizations that were involved in providing supplies and self-help. For example, they were the ones who sustained the children’s corners established by the house committees and youth movements. The Berson-Bauman children’s hospital had an important patronage program for women headed by Felicja Czerniakow, the wife of the chairman of the Warsaw Ghetto Judenrat, Adam Czerniakow. In addition, the patronage program provided supplies for the soup kitchens in schools in the *punkten* – the centers for the poorest refugees.³⁹

The documents we have confirm Mokarska’s leadership in all of these initiatives. She established groups of women who met regularly to plan, organize, and to carry out the work. These meetings also included talks and lectures on how to enlarge the number of women activists. In the context of the changing conditions in the ghetto, her initiatives contributed greatly to the centrality of women in all of the self-help activities in the ghetto and to the almost total replacement of men from the house committees. Ringelblum himself wrote about the women who were everywhere and how they had become “the center of the nerve system of activities.”⁴⁰ He emphasized that “the tireless Mokarska was everywhere.”⁴¹ The importance of these women, Ringelblum wrote, increased in the months prior to the mass deportations in the summer of

³⁹ On the issue of women’s patronage and their involvement in the self-help organization see, Lea Prais, *haplitim Hayehudiim Beghetto Warsaw* (The Jewish Refugees in the Warsaw Ghetto) (PhD Dissertation. Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2006), 156-158, 190-191, 330-332.

⁴⁰ Emanuel Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, September 1939-December 1942* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1992), 365.

⁴¹ Ringelblum, *Last Writings*, 35.

1942. During the deportations Mokarska hid in the brush-making workshop on Leszno Street. But she was caught and sent to the Umschlagplatz – and then murdered in Treblinka.⁴²

It is tempting to think about what propelled Mokarska to become an inspired leader for poor women and children. Was it her “can-do” personality? Or her experience as an activist in Łódź? Or was it the hardships she endured as an uprooted but still somewhat established person that shaped her sympathy with other refugees who had less? Whatever the answer is to these more psychological questions, the theories we suggested in our introduction offer three structural frameworks for analyzing her experiences. At first, we might see Shulamith Mokarska as a straightforward example of the continuity model. In pre-war Łódź she was already involved in helping and caring for others, especially those who were poor and were children, and she continued in these activities when she came to Warsaw. However, there are also a number of facts that point to seeing her as someone who changed after she became a refugee from Łódź, and therefore, an example of disjuncture. For example, in the Warsaw ghetto she not only continued to volunteer herself, but she also became a forceful leader who recruited and organized a cadre of other women to plan, promote, prepare, and distribute meals and activities for children and poor families. Tracing her growth into these new roles in Warsaw suggests that the sequential framework is best for capturing the totality of her experiences. When she first arrived in Warsaw we see her adopting her Łódź experience to the conditions in Warsaw. But from then on, she became a leader of activities (both informally and in her position as head of the women’s sector of ŻTOS Jewish Society for Public Welfare) who mobilized and guided other women in the fight to alleviate the hunger and suffering of the poor.

⁴² Ringelblum, *Last Writings*, 2, 34-35; Prais, *Jewish Refugees*, 156-58, 190-191, 330-332.

BATIA TEMKIN-BERMAN –
A LIBRARIAN IN THE WARSAW GHETTO
AND AN OPERATIVE ON THE ARYAN SIDE

Batia Temkin-Berman (1907-1953) was a dedicated librarian who was especially devoted to children and to establishing a children's library in the Warsaw ghetto. Our portrait of her draws on two primary sources: the diary she wrote when she was in hiding in the Aryan side in Warsaw, and Cecilia Slepak's interviews with Batia Temkin-Berman in the Warsaw ghetto in late 1941 and the summer of 1942.⁴³

Batia was born in Warsaw to a lower class Jewish family. She was a good student and graduated from the Free Polish University (Wolna Wszechnica Polska) in humanities and social sciences. As a student she was involved in the Jewish socialist student group *Jugend* and served as its secretary for a number of years in the late 1920s. In the 1930s she was active in the antifascist block. Eventually she joined the left wing *Poale Zion*, a Zionist workers party that sought to combine radical socialism with Zionism.⁴⁴ In 1936, she married the psychologist Dr. Adolf Berman who was also a left-wing Zionist activist, and a leader of the ghetto underground. He was a central activist in the Jewish self help organization. They

⁴³ Temkin-Berman's diary was written in Polish from May 1944-January 14, 1945. And she worked on it and clarified much of the acronyms until her death in 1952. It was first published in Hebrew, *Yoman Bamachteret* (An Underground Diary) (Tel Aviv: Hotsaat Ha-Kibuts Ha-Meuhad Bet Lohame Ha-Gitaot, 1956). A new translation from the Polish handwriting and an annotated edition was published in 2008 under another title, *Ir Betoach ir* (A City within a City) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), with an introduction of her son Emanuel Berman on her life, and of Yisrael Gutman. When quoting we use the 2008 edition. Slepak, YVA, ARI 49; Ringelblum, *Last Writings*, 223-225; Ofer, "Her View through My Lens."

⁴⁴ Temkin-Berman, *Ir betoach ir*, 29 (introduction of her son Emanuel Berman). For the important connections between the people of the Ringelblum group *Poale Zion* left party, see Kassow, *Who Will Write*, 27-48. On *Poale Zion* left party see, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Zionism_and_Zionist_Parties.

did not have children during the war years, their son Emanuel was born in Poland in 1946.

After graduating from university she worked as a librarian in a branch of the Warsaw Public Library and as an advisor for the Jewish collection. She was devoted to her work and was on friendly terms with her co-workers. However, she was dismissed from her job in December 1939 because the Germans decreed that Jews could not work in non-Jewish institutions. One month later, in January 1940, she was hired in the clothing department of the refugee aid committee CENTOS (Centrala Towarzystwa nad Sierotami, the Central Organization for the Care of Orphans.) At that time tens of thousands of Jewish refugees were being deported from smaller towns in the Western parts of Poland and pouring into Warsaw. They arrived with almost nothing and were in dire need of warm clothing, especially in the severely cold winter of 1940. Drawing on her organizational skills, Batia distributed clothing to the refugees and made use of every garment that was contributed to CENTOS.

But Batia also had a dream of her own: she wanted to open a library for Jewish children because German decrees prohibited their attendance at school and their use of the public libraries. With great zeal she set about collecting books (and some toys) for the children, and hid them in the warehouse where the clothing was stored.⁴⁵ After a full day of work she would select the books that were suitable for the future library and distribute the others to children's homes, refugee assembly centers and the "children's corners" established by the house committees. In May 1940, she was dismissed from her job at CENTOS because her husband, who was a director there, was already providing for the family. She nevertheless continued to work there without pay, as a volunteer, because the job allowed her to conceal her secret work of collecting and hiding children's books for the future library.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1974), 107-108; Temkin-Berman, *Ir betoch ir*, 12-13, (from the introduction of Gutman).

In November 1940, when the formation of the Warsaw ghetto was announced, Batia realized that she might get cut off from her books. When she found out that one of the city libraries would be in the area of the ghetto, she began to lobby to keep it as a library in the ghetto. Because it had to be hidden from the Nazi authorities, she convinced the CENTOS directors to put their name on the entrance, to make it appear like one of their offices.

Once she had an "official" place and the tacit cooperation of CENTOS, she became even more energetic in collecting books from previous libraries and private collections all over town. She then lobbied the Judenrat to obtain Nazi permission to allow the library to operate openly and, surprisingly, the permit finally arrived after the library had functioned illegally for about half a year. Six months later the use of the library was extended. Children were allowed to borrow two books at a time, one in Yiddish and one in Polish. Batia encouraged them to read Yiddish literature and was willing to teach Yiddish. Once a week she read aloud to the children at story time. Some of the young patrons told her their fathers would read the books they had checked out to the family on Fridays. She also opened a reading room for journals and reference books, and adults also came to read. To the extent that one could be happy in the ghetto, Batia was, in fact, happy. It was her dream come true. Children from the orphanages and children's homes were coming to the library and found comfort in the books.

In November 1941, Batia Temkin-Berman became the director of the library and was again paid for her work. It was a small salary, but she needed it to support her mother and refugee sister. But most important was her feeling of great satisfaction with her work. This is what she told Cecilia Slepak, the journalist who interviewed her: "I work with love; I live because of my work, and emotionally it is healing me. I believe that I am promising a future for these children."⁴⁶ In her essay on women in the Warsaw ghetto, Cecilia

⁴⁶ YVA, RAI/49.

Slepak described Batia Temkin-Berman with great admiration. In fact, she regarded her as the model of a professional women who was both dedicated and daring in her determination to continue with her profession in the ghetto.⁴⁷

During the massive deportations from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka death camp in the summer of 1942, Batia Temkin-Berman was caught twice and taken to the Umschlagplatz for deportation. Both times she managed to escape. But soon after her second escape, in September 1942, she and her husband, Dr. Adolf Berman, escaped from the Warsaw ghetto and began living on the “Aryan side” of Warsaw. This was especially risky for Batia because she “looked Jewish” and their lives, like those of all Jews who were passing as non-Jews outside the ghetto, were filled with tension and anxiety because they were always under the threat of death.⁴⁸

The Bermans pretended to be a brother and sister, two ordinary Poles who had been displaced from the occupied Eastern territories.⁴⁹ They immediately became involved in the underground’s efforts to support the Jews who were hiding on the “Aryan side” of the city, and to help other Jews escape from the ghetto. It was dangerous work and the Bermans lived in constant fear of the blackmailers, known as *szmalcowniks*, who hunted down Jews on the Aryan side. Toward the end of 1942, Dr. Adolf-Abraham Berman became one of the heads of the newly created Żegota (Council for Aid to Jews). Batia worked with them and carried out many operations to remove children from the ghetto and hide them on the Aryan side.

Most of Batia’s time and inner strength were devoted to the dangerous daily grind of distributing small amounts of money to those in hiding, finding places of shelter, and supplying false

⁴⁷ Ibid. and “Her View through My Lens,” 45.

⁴⁸ Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations*, 108-111.

⁴⁹ Temkin-Berman, *Ir betoch ir*, 50-51. On the issue of living on the Aryan side, see Lenore J. Weitzman, “Passing on the Aryan Side in Poland,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 187-222.

papers. Every day she walked from one hiding place to another. Because she was afraid that she looked “very Jewish” she had to be extremely careful and disguise her appearance by dressing as a poor Polish village woman with her face partly covered by a black hat and scarf.⁵⁰ In small cafes she met Polish underground activists, men and women, who became her close friends and brought her money and information she could pass on.⁵¹ But she was, in fact, quite vulnerable, and more than once she was followed by a Pole who suspected her and threatened to take her to the Gestapo if she did not pay him off (and she was forced to do.) When one of them followed her home, she was forced to find another place to live, and there were many other days when she did not know where she would sleep when the evening curfew began.⁵²

Batia wrote a diary all her life. But she left it in the ghetto and it was never found. However, from May 5, 1944 to January 14, 1945 she wrote again, describing the lives she and her husband were living as illegal operatives outside the ghetto. Her major aim was to leave an accurate account of their rescue activities outside the ghetto. But she also wanted to leave a memory of all the persons that were assisting the rescue work and those who were in need. Therefore she mentioned names and used code names for many more. This writing was itself a risk for a person who had to leave dwellings in haste and could have been caught and taken to the Gestapo.⁵³

After the war Batia continued to assist Jews who came back to Warsaw but soon she returned to her beloved profession and sought to recreate Jewish libraries in liberated Poland. She rescued tens of thousands of books that became the foundation of a new

⁵⁰ Temkin-Berman, *Ir betoch ir*, 93.

⁵¹ Temkin-Berman, *Yoman Bamachteret*, 234. Batia and her husband were central in organizing the assistance Żegota was providing for some 2,000 Jews trying to hide on the “Aryan side” in Warsaw (between the end of 1942 and the end of 1944).

⁵² Temkin-Berman, *Ir betoch ir*, 48-56.

⁵³ YVA ARI/49.

collection of Jewish books in Poland. In 1950 she immigrated to Israel with her husband and son and she became a librarian in a school. This job did not provide the satisfaction she had hoped for, and her deteriorating health also contributed to her lack of happiness at this stage of her life. She was still haunted by her memories and felt that she had a moral responsibility to write about all her friends and colleagues who were murdered. In the last years of her life she worked hard to complete her memoirs and diary. She did not complete this mission and passed away on April 3, 1953.

In analyzing the experiences of Batia Temkin-Berman, one can easily see patterns that support both the continuity theory and the disrupture model. The portrait of continuity points to her staying in the roles she knew so well – the supportive wife and the educator who continued to care for children, children's books, and libraries in the ghetto. In Slepak's narrative, Batia referred to her profession as her "inner voice" to fulfill her mission. It was the thread in her life that kept her going. She yearned to establish the children's library, and that became her mission. It is also important to note that she was already a professional woman, with a professional reputation, before the war. She had experience in a political movement and was well connected to the Jewish self-help organizations. These assets and her professional standing made it possible for her to continue to work in her profession and to make her dream come true – by establishing a secret library in the ghetto. Since the library was illegal, her activities, though under the auspices of CENTOS, show her courage and willingness to defy Nazi orders.

On the other hand, one can also point to aspects of her war-time behavior that broke with her pre-war past. While not a total disrupture, we see her tenacity in wanting to create a library for children as leading her to illegal behavior, and to defying the Nazis in order to accomplish her goal. But, in the end, the framework that best captures the complexity of Batia Temkin-Berman's experiences is the sequential model because her story is the chronicle

of a woman who starts out as a librarian with a dream of creating a library for poor children. When she faces the unusual constraints of the ghetto she turns to illegal underground activities. Then, when she finds herself on the Aryan side, she goes even further and becomes involved in ever more radical and illegal behavior in her efforts to rescue and save other Jews. By the time she becomes an underground activist for Żegota she has become a different person and is totally committed to rescue and to all the dangers and illegal activities that involved.

BRONKA KLIBANSKI –
A COURIER IN THE BIALYSTOK GHETTO

Bronka Klibanski (1923-2011) was one of the heroic *kashariyot* (couriers) in the Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.⁵⁴ In January 1943, she became the primary *kasharit* for the Dror Zionist group in the Bialystok ghetto and smuggled weapons for the ghetto revolt, rescued other Jews, and saved the secret archive of the Bialystok ghetto. She continued her underground activities after the Bialystok ghetto was destroyed, supporting the partisans in the forests near Białystok and sabotaging German activities for which she received a medal as a heroine of the USSR after the war. We are fortunate to have several sources of information about Bronka Klibanski's life: Lenore Weitzman interviewed her many times between 1993 and 2010 and wrote the biographical entry on her for the *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*.⁵⁵ In addition, Bronka wrote about her experiences in a chapter for our book on *Women in*

⁵⁴ Lenore J. Weitzman, "Bronka Klibanski," in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, eds. Paula Hyman and Dalia Ofer (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), n.p.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Lenore Weitzman interviewed Bronka Klibanski a number of times between 1993-2010, interviews by the author. The quotations cited below are from interviews in Jerusalem, Israel, June 12, 1993 and June 21, 1994.

the Holocaust.⁵⁶ Later in her life she published her own memoir in Hebrew in 2002.⁵⁷

Bronka Klibanski was born Bronia Vinitzki on January 24, 1923 in Grodno, Poland. The first 12 years of her life were quite regular: her mother inspired her children's love of Yiddish music, culture, and literature. Her father, a cattle dealer, was initially comfortable, but then lost most of his customers in the depression of the early 1930s. Her mother then became the family provider by opening a kiosk to sell fruit and sweets. Bronka joined the Dror Zionist youth group in the 1930s and, along with other members, was preparing for aliyah to Palestine. Her activities in this Zionist youth group over the next six years may help us understand her "ideological readiness" for the non-conventional activities she became involved in during the war. On November 1, 1941, the 30,000 Jews in Grodno were ordered to move into two ghettos. When Bronka saw the long lines and the way the German guards were inspecting and harassing the Jews, she decided to find another way to get into the ghetto. She snuck in and felt empowered. As she said: "From the beginning I was not following their orders."⁵⁸ Bronka's talent for slipping in and out of the ghetto soon led to her smuggling critically needed food for her family, in order to "bring home something to ease the gnawing hunger."⁵⁹

The dramatic event that changed Bronka's life was a meeting in January 1942 with Mordechai Tennenbaum, one of the national leaders of the Dror Zionist youth group. It was Tennenbaum's shocking news of the mass killings of the Jews of Vilna in the forests of Ponary – and his analysis of the systematic murderous

⁵⁶ Bronka Klibanski, "In the Ghetto and in the Resistance: A Personal Narrative," in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 175-186.

⁵⁷ Bronka Klibanski, *Ariadne* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Gevanim, 2002).

⁵⁸ Weitzman, interview with Klibanski, Jerusalem, Israel, June 12, 1993. Cf. Sara Bender, *The Jews of Bialystok During World War II and the Holocaust* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2008).

⁵⁹ Bronka Klibanski, "In the Ghetto and in the Resistance: A Personal Narrative," 175.

agenda of the Germans – that inspired Bronka to become involved in active resistance. In November 1942, Tennenbaum was sent from Warsaw to organize the underground Jewish resistance in Bialystok and he soon tapped Bronka to become a *kasharit* (courier) for the Dror movement. By the end of 1942, all but one of the Dror *kashariyot* in Poland had been caught by the Germans, and Bronka's skills were keenly needed. Tennenbaum wanted someone with the courage to undertake the dangerous task of securing arms and weapons for the ghetto revolt. As Bronka explained: "I was not afraid. I was fearless. I had practice going in and out of the ghetto...and with Germans...and I would not get caught."⁶⁰

But no one could really be prepared for the anxiety-filled life of an underground operative working among hostile Germans and Poles. It was hard for her to leave her close-knit group of friends in the Dror movement in the Grodno ghetto, and especially difficult to part from her family when she realized that they, along with all the other Jews in the ghetto, were condemned to death. Most wrenching was having to walk away from her mother without telling her she was leaving – because everyone in the underground was sworn to secrecy. But she knew that her mother had a feeling, as mothers do, that her daughter was leaving her, and the sadness and image of their parting stayed with Bronka for the rest of her life.

Armed with little more than her German issued identity cards, Bronka left the Grodno ghetto on the last day of 1942. She became, in fact, an excellent underground operative and ingenious in finding arms for the Jewish resistance. Equally important, she was adroit in smuggling them into the heavily guarded Bialystok ghetto. She also gathered intelligence for the ghetto underground and played a critical role in hiding the underground archives of the Bialystok ghetto. But she lived the lonely and anxiety-filled life of all the women couriers on the Aryan side, never knowing when she would meet someone from her past or say or do something

⁶⁰ Weitzman, interview with Klibanski, Jerusalem, Israel, June 12, 1993.

that would arouse suspicion and lead to her arrest. The only time she could relax was when her mission brought her back to the ghetto and she was allowed to stay for a night with her friends in Dror who were planning the revolt.

In August 1943, the Germans caught the resistance by surprise and marched into the Białystok ghetto with heavily armed troops to liquidate the ghetto. They quashed a last-minute attempted revolt and destroyed the ghetto. Alone on the Aryan side, Bronka met five other young Jewish women who had also been working as couriers for their youth movements and they pledged to work together to save other Jews. They also began helping the Jewish and Soviet partisans in the nearby forests. In the spring of 1944, Soviet paratroopers reached the forests and began to unify the groups operating there. Bronka's group of young women then became couriers for the Soviet headquarters of the partisan groups.⁶¹

How then does Bronka fit into our theories? On the one hand, there was such a dramatic change in her life when she became a courier for the Jewish resistance movement that it might seem self-evident that her experiences would be best explained by the disrupture model. However, when we examine her life course, we can see a series of steps in which she gradually engaged in more unconventional and illegal behavior. For example, at the beginning, she was "just" smuggling and sneaking in and out of the ghetto to provide food for her family. But when she heard Mordechai Tennenbaum talk about the mass killings, and when he then asked her to become a courier for the underground Jewish resistance, she reached a tipping point where all of her energy and resourcefulness was focused on Jewish resistance.

Even though she was already self-confident and had already defied the Germans, and even though she was already committed to the Dror Zionist movement and accepted their ideology of sacrificing oneself for the collective good, once she became a *kasharit* – an official courier for the Dror underground resistance – she

⁶¹ Klibanski, *Ariadne*, 84-93.

embraced her new role as a vital “soldier” in the underground army of Jewish resistance. While she was empowered and supported and mentored in her new role, once she left the ghetto, she was on her own on the Aryan side. She had to rely on her own ingenuity and courage to carry out a series of dangerous missions – from finding the peasants who had hidden the weapons the Russians left behind, to gaining their confidence as a fellow “Polish” patriot, to smuggling their guns and ammunition back into the Ghetto. She was able to withstand multiple searches on the train rides back to Białystok, and she cleverly managed ways to smuggle the sorely needed guns and ammunition for the planned revolt. The sequential framework therefore seems most appropriate for capturing her full story. It enables us to see her progress, as well as to trace her radical transformation into a daring covert agent for the underground Jewish resistance. Once she embraced her new role, she initiated a series of dangerous missions, and became an important role model for a generation of young women.

We began this chapter by outlining three frameworks for understanding women’s experiences during the Holocaust: the first focusing on the continuity between their pre-war gender roles and their responses during the Holocaust; the second focusing on the discontinuity and rupture between the two; and the third offering a sequential framework for viewing their behavior as a series of step-by-step responses that resulted in a substantial change over the course of the war. In analyzing the experiences of the four women above, we asked, in each case, which framework provided a fuller and richer understanding of the women’s responses to the Nazi assault. All the women were primarily in ghettos, Malka Selver in Łódź, Shulamith Mokarska and Batia Temkin-Berman in Warsaw, and Bronka Klibanski in Grodno and Białystok. While they differ greatly in their initial status – with Malka Selver struggling to feed her children, Shulamith Mokarska organizing other women to aid poor women and children, Batia Temkin-Berman trying to maintain a library for children, and Bronka Klibanski, the

youngest, who was initially a student, active in a youth movement, and assisting her family, all of them faced serious challenges that led them to considerably modify their pre-war behavior, stretch their boundaries, and enlarge the sphere of their activities. While their narratives might, at first, appear to support the disrupture model, when we analyzed their behavior in more detail, we found that each embarked on a series of “smaller” sequential steps that cumulatively led to their new roles and behavior.

Thus each of these cases appears to be better explained by our sequential model. For example, Malka Selver, the mother who was left alone to care for her family after the death of her husband in the Łódź ghetto, was at first too overcome by depression and illness to even maintain her pre-war role as a mother and caretaker. However, she eventually recovered and made a series of decisions that led to her emergence as a forceful and effective family leader, a role that was dramatically different than her role before the war. Similarly, before the war Shulamith Mokarska was a middle class woman, who had the opportunity to engage in voluntary public work, but her experience as a refugee in the Warsaw ghetto propelled her into a new position in the Łódź Landsmannschaft, and she initiated operations that put her in the center of the welfare activities for women and children in the ghetto. Batia Temkin-Berman entered the war period as a professional librarian who first engaged in illegal activities as an extension of her pre-war role to establish a secret library in the ghetto. But she then continued to engage in illegal activity and to defy Nazi orders to achieve other goals when she escaped to the Aryan side and became an underground activist engaged in rescue activities for Żegota. Finally, Bronka Klibanski also experienced dramatic changes in her life after she was chosen to be a courier for the Dror underground resistance movement. Here too, it might, at first, seem self-evident that the disrupture model would be the best framework for analyzing her experiences. But once again, when we track her development more closely, we find her taking a series of steps, and carrying out ever more dangerous and risky

missions, as she is transformed into a strong young woman and a seasoned operative for the Jewish resistance. Among her many missions, this innocent school girl found ways to acquire weapons (when no one else in the ghetto had weapons) and to successfully smuggle them – past policemen and guards and border controls and train inspectors – back to the ghetto for those who were planning the ghetto revolt.

In summary, our analysis suggests that the sequential model, which is based on a careful examination of the details of each of these cases, provides a fuller understanding of the responses of Jewish women to the Nazi assault than either the “continuity” or the “disrupture” framework. In addition to suggesting the usefulness of the sequential framework, this article also suggests how specific factors fostered or enabled (or thwarted) the sequential changes in these women. For example, we pointed to the influence of their pre-war status and occupation; the structure of their families and friendship networks; and the organizations and groups with which they were affiliated. In addition, we have noted how their experiences were shaped by the larger structural and social context in which they lived, including the events, conditions, timing, and severity of the Nazi assault. The influence of all of these very specific factors lead us to suggest that theories about gendered responses – or about anyone’s responses to the Holocaust – should be built from the details of individual experiences and not from pre-conceived “abstract theories.” But once this work is done, we believe that theories that are grounded in these details can then help scholars recognize common patterns among groups of individuals, and thereby afford all of us a greater understanding of the patterns of Jewish women’s responses during the Holocaust.

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Women's Luxury Items in Concentration Camps

BOŻENA KARWOWSKA

Considering that patriarchal tradition placed in the center man and (his) intellectual life, even the experiences of German Nazi concentration and extermination camps have been viewed and described largely through intellectual (male) categories.¹ And therein lies the paradox and the problem of post-Nazi culture, namely the influence that discourses characteristic of the “high,” patriarchal cultural elites have had on the way in which life in the camps has been described. Moreover, the literary language (used in many autobiographical accounts of the camps) is the language of those whom the system of power places in a privileged position.² As such it carries within itself traditional values and allows naming objects, situations and those who are viewed as “others” according to the interest of the privileged group. In terms of the camps it allowed for example to use the term “hospital” for a place which had little to do with health care except symbolically.³ Such

¹ See: Susan Bordo, “The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought,” *Signs* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 439-456; and Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Ma(t)ters: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (Melbourne: Spinfex Press, 1992), xv-xxx.

² See: Joan Wallach Scott, “On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (Spring 1987), 1-13.

³ See: Stanisław Grzesiuk, *Pięć lat kacetu*, 7th ed. (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1972); Bożena Karwowska, *Ciało, seksualność, obozy zagłady* (Kraków: Universitas, 2009).

language is above all else an instrument of power, it enables the manipulation of reality. Viewing camp literature from this perspective, it is easier to understand how serious a problem was the fact that the originators and (to some extent) perpetrators of the Holocaust were members or followers of the patriarchal cultural elite. Making use of a language and of categories that originated outside the system which, while it was not perhaps directly responsible for the Holocaust, did not stand up against it, enable one to grasp issues which it is otherwise difficult to name and describe.⁴

The two main terms used in this writing – luxury and gender – are seldom discussed in the context of the Holocaust.⁵ Concentration and extermination camps, together with prisons and POW camps, are hardly ever connected with the word “luxury.” Though luxury comes in many forms, it is increasingly hard to define and the criteria are hardly scientific; regardless of the definition, the concept is applied to the world of people who enjoy many sides of freedom.⁶ A close reading of memoirs of the survivors of the German Nazi concentration camps, however, reveals that both luxury and gender can provide an interesting lens for looking at the realm of the camps.

In their memoirs of the camps former prisoners recorded, though usually unconsciously, that people were directed to camps for men or women not on the basis of their gender or sex, but their bodies seen as feminine or masculine. However, a Polish writer and

⁴ See: Susan Bordo, “Maleness’ Revisited,” *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1992), 197-207; and Judith Butler, “Response to Bordo’s ‘Feminist Skepticism and the ‘Maleness’ of Philosophy,’” *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (Summer, 1992), 162-165.

⁵ See: Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (Dec. 1986): 1053-1075; Jane S. Upin, “Applying the Concept of Gender: Unsettled Questions,” *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1992), 180-187.

⁶ See: Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999); John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1977).

Auschwitz survivor Seweryna Szmaglewska noted in her memoirs *Dymy nad Birkenau* [Smoke over Birkenau] that with time the prisoners' bodies were losing their sexual characteristics and were becoming "childish."⁷ One would not distinguish between female and male body, especially from a distance. And while the perpetrator did not see the prisoner as a man or a woman (the gesture frequently repeated by prisoners themselves), and thus denied them their humanity, the prisoners who could not rely on the bodily differences had to cling to their gender with its culturally imposed characteristics, in order to preserve their humanity.⁸

An interesting critical approach which helps to understand the situation presented by Szmaglewska (who witnessed and recorded the extermination of Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz) and other authors of camp memoirs, is provided by feminist criticism dealing with "captive" African Americans (slaves).⁹ From this perspective, imprisonment in the camp can be viewed as "theft of the body," that is "a willful and violent...severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire." One of the consequences of such theft is the blurring of gender difference since the bodies of both women and men "become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific."¹⁰ At the same time – from the point of view of the "captives" – the body is a private space (often being the only kind of privacy there is) which, however, the "owners" transform into an object. According to Hortense J. Spillers, in this situation, "the captured sexualities

⁷ Seweryna Szmaglewska, *Dymy nad Birkenau*, 7th ed. (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1963). All quotations are in my translation, B.K.

⁸ See: Karwowska, *Ciało, seksualność, obozy zagłady*, 61–81.

⁹ The word "captives" is used here both to underscore analogies with prisoners and slaves as well as to avoid identifying them exclusively with these two groups.

¹⁰ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 386.

provide a physical and biological expression of 'otherness.'"¹¹ All this is occurring in a situation in which the "captives" (in this case camp prisoners) are deprived of their "normal" (patriarchal) social roles – their position in the family ceases to determine their place in the world in which they function. Instead they have to function in a world whose rules are totally alien to them, and sometimes incomprehensible. Their bodies become objects and their value is determined by a system hostile to the captive, so that, placed in such a system, the captive loses both identity and personality. Spillers further argues that to prevent this process captives try to preserve traces of familiar social functions, including gender difference and gender specific social roles and models.

The physical separation of sexes, and degradation of the body- made sexuality (and in fact the category of sex) is of limited use in the concentration camps.¹² However, even though Spillers notices that the captives "lose at least *gender difference in the outcome*," she also sees the captive body as focusing "a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join."¹³ By the same token, the body becomes the territory in which sex and gender become indistinguishable and inseparable.¹⁴ For the people coming to Auschwitz, it was the state of the body that conditioned their fate in the camp – the young and healthy had a chance to survive when those with old and sickly appearances were selected to die immediately. The process of "selection" for the immediate extermination was repeated in the camp from time to time, and it was the state (or appearance) of the body that was used as criteria. One may argue, however, that gender also played a role during the selection, since mothers

¹¹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 386.

¹² See: Karwowska, *Ciało, seksualność, obozy zagłady*, 74-78.

¹³ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 385.

¹⁴ See: Toril Moi, "What Is a Woman? Sex, Gender, and the Body in Feminist Theory," in *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-120.

of young children were exterminated immediately regardless of the state of their bodies.

In fact memoirs of many survivors reveal their authors' inability to separate both spheres (biological and symbolic). One may even argue that the biological difference between sexes, or the binary sexual character of humans, is in many memoirs almost forgotten. It looks like their authors' view on the human body in the concentration camps comes from the pre-18th century thinking in terms of one sex (all male parts of the body are duplicated in females not as completing each other but rather establishing a hierarchical order).¹⁵ It was then the gender, not the sex/body that was creating a binary opposition of male and female, and thus defined humans. Prisoners in the camps were deprived of their "primary" biological sexual function of reproduction; they differed only in gender roles. In this situation the ability to perform gender reflected on prisoners "humanity." The situation thus reinforced the importance of hierarchically seen culturally imposed differences between male and female, categorizing them into two distinct genders. Especially important in this context is replacing the sexual characteristics of the (sexed) body by gendered behaviors, gestures, and objects.

Not always fully aware of their fate, Jews transported to the death camps were following the Nazi instructions and brought with them the most precious possessions, maybe also believing that luxury objects can help them to save their lives or make them more comfortable. Deprived of their valuables right on the ramp, they were, with some exceptions, sent directly to gas chambers, while their belongings were collected, sorted, and stored in the camps. The majority of objects acquired in this way was sent to the Reich, but some items were used in the camps by the administration, and some were stolen (or "organized") by prisoners and circulated on the camps' black markets.

In their memoirs many survivors write that the life of prisoners in concentration camps was much worse than that of those

¹⁵ See: Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender form the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

imprisoned in death camps, as in the latter the black market of goods brought by so called “transports” was a source of additional food and clothing, usually of high quality, luxurious items. What is especially interesting, the value of luxury objects, brought to the camps especially by women, was quite different than in the world outside of the camps. One may argue, especially in this context, that luxury is connected primarily with the body (not sex or gender, though it comes in gender specific varieties), is a convenience, a bodily pleasure more than a pleasure of the mind. This is why it is easily connected with women (and feminization) as they are always entering the public space with their bodies.¹⁶ In fact references to luxury items in the camp memoirs suggest that it is the body itself that gives luxury a meaning.

Luxurious objects are only rarely mentioned in men's memoirs, and usually only as silk shirts or underwear of “kapos' boys,” with a homosexual undertone in the narration. An interesting “luxury object” is described in Stanislaw Grzesiuk's memoir *Pięć lat kacetu* [Five Years in Concentration Camps].¹⁷ It is not only its nature, but also the material it was made of and the fact that it was made inside the concentration camp. Grzesiuk refers to a decoratively fashioned bracelet and camp number in the following paragraph:

This number cost a lot of cigarettes and several loaves of bread. It really was pretty. Fewer than twenty people had such numbers in the camp. Literally, such a one as I had, that is, made of human bone, well, I have no idea how many people could have had such a one. A pal from the sick-bay...managed to get for me in pathology a piece of boiled human shinbone, which was then made into my number and a bracelet.¹⁸

Another interesting example is provided by Tadeusz Borowski's confession: “We did not fight in the camps for the idea of the

¹⁶ See: Belinda J. Carpenter, *Re-Thinking Prostitution: Feminism, Sex, and Self* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

¹⁷ Grzesiuk, *Pięć lat kacetu*.

¹⁸ Ibid., 364.

Fatherland or for the inner reinvention of human beings; we fought for a bowl of soup, for a place to sleep, for women, gold and watches from the transports.”¹⁹ Thus in his words women are not only objectified but also listed among luxury items. Interestingly, they are among valuable objects that have no direct use in the camps and can be utilized there only as a form of currency. By the same token women are mentioned by Borowski in their role of an object of exchange typical for male kinship-building in a patriarchal society.²⁰ As luxury objects they served men to construct their gender role and to perform their masculinity.

In memoirs written by women the luxury items are always brought from the outside world, but the “outside” luxurious items do not always serve as a “luxury” inside the camps. Many authors refer to Elizabeth Arden cosmetics and Guerlain perfumes, along with fashionable shoes and dresses, as objects brought by Jewish women to Dachau or Auschwitz. Zofia Kossak in her memoir *Z otchłani* [From the abyss] writes:

[R]ich Jewesses from foreign countries, who were not aware of the fate awaiting them, were coming to Auschwitz with many things. In addition to exquisite clothing and bedding, they carried perfume by Guerlain and Elizabeth Arden cosmetics, ballroom dresses, tennis equipment, medical kits, anti-conception aids (the latter was the specialty of French Jewesses), children’s toys... diamonds.

Gems of Dutch merchants, treasures and heirlooms of old bankers families of Amsterdam, were coming hidden in hair, dresses, a granddaughter’s teddy bear, in the patriarchal wig of a grandmother.²¹

The luxury items are later referred to or described in memoirs, sometimes in quite surprising context, as for instance in the “overflow” camp in Birkenau, called by prisoners “Mexico.” “This sector

¹⁹ Janusz Nel-Siedlecki, Krystyn Olszewski, Tadeusz Borowski, *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo MON, 1958), 6-8.

²⁰ See: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

²¹ Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, *Z otchłani* (Rzym: Polski Dom Wydawniczy, 1946), 114.

is not meant for permanent living quarters. It is not an independent part of the camp like other sectors and has no...kitchen, or sanitary installations. Mexico is treated like a branch or colony, kept in reserve for emergency in case of extreme overpopulation in the sector 'c,'" writes Seweryna Szmaglewska.²² According to her, in 1943 there were up to 42,000 women in Birkenau, and the camp was extremely overcrowded as camp "c" and Mexico "normally" could not accommodate more than 28,000. Unprepared for such a large number of prisoners, the Nazi authorities also ran out of uniforms for women. In other camps in such cases prisoners were given civil clothes with a large white cross painted on the back, but the choice of civil dresses given to women in Mexico may be surprising. Szmaglewska writes:

Idleness is one of the worst curses in this city of women. Weak from exhaustion, each day more ragged in appearance, they move among the blocks, awaiting their fate in the heat of the summer days. Their dresses, often of silk and lace, sometimes backless evening gowns, scorched by many delousing, cracked and torn, fall off their bodies.²³

Szmaglewska's description is not the only account of ballroom dresses or evening gowns given to female prisoners. Others also noticed upon their arrival in the camp a group of skeletons in ballroom gowns making their first impressions of the camp unreal and impossible to describe. In their memoirs several survivors recalled wedding veils given to women prisoners instead of handkerchiefs, as mandatory head coverings. The lace and silk dresses mentioned by Szmaglewska were undisputably luxurious and expensive, but also made to fit their original owners, thus of a limited use for other women and as such better utilized in the camp, when necessary. Of importance here may be the small body size of elegant Jewish women (noticed by many authors of memoirs) being at variance with the typical Nazi image of the German woman.

²² Szmaglewska, *Dymy nad Birkenau*, 257.

²³ Ibid.

The ballroom dresses were made not to cover but rather to reveal the body, making it tempting and sexually attractive.²⁴ The body of a women prisoner, lacking beauty, sexless, and resembling a skeleton, was by no means sexually attractive, but women were still judged by the standards of modesty from the “free world” outside the camps. “It is generally said that women in Mexico lost all their shame and womanhood,” wrote Szmaglewska. By pronouncing such a judgment prisoners were in fact repeating the gesture of the perpetrator and they double victimized women who were not given more suitable clothes. In several memoirs women stress that *cugangi* (the new prisoners) were looking into giving up their civil clothes and using camp uniforms seeing them as an identity forming item. For many women the uniform meant the enforcement and a representation of identity of a prisoner taking over all other social identities and thus civil clothes in the camps were a misleading sign of freedom. Asexual looks and behaviors were in line with the importance of reinforcing gender models in the camps. Deprived of their patriarchal functions prisoners were trying to save their humanity by performing gender in its most typical roles, and in the case of women it was above all the sexless role of a mother.

One should not ignore the fact that the majority of firsthand accounts comes from authors belonging to the intellectual circles, with a system of values recognizing the superiority of the mind over the body. They represent thus the same line of thinking that resulted in criticizing both the aristocratic luxury and the bourgeois consumerism, and saw inner growth and intellectual values as superior.²⁵ Thus it does not come as a surprise that in the reality of the camps luxury items could be enjoyed only by those whose moral values were questionable and who worked together with

²⁴ See: Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

²⁵ See: Warren G. Breckman, “Disciplining Consumption: The Debate about Luxury in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1914,” *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991), 485-505.

the perpetrators, making the intellectuals' judgment stronger and more just. Szmaglewska continues:

A functionary passes by, dressed snugly in high shoes and a colorful rubber cape. And quite nearby, beyond the wall, sits the bloc supervisor or the camp senior or another functionary in her cozy room. Dressed in the most fashionable style from head to toe, in dainty underwear and finely tailored dress, exquisitely sheer hosiery and shapely pumps with high heels, smelling a good perfume, her hair stylishly dressed, she sits, satisfied with herself and smiling with complacency.²⁶

In a way typical for the intellectuals criticizing the bourgeois consumerism and luxury, she links it with "philistines" and their lack of taste when she writes:

The room is furnished – from the point of view of a camp – with luxury; from the point of view of camp conditions – with elegance; and from the point of view of prewar standards – with appalling lack of good taste. Genuine Oriental rugs, priceless tapestries, and rich Hungarian fabrics cover the walls and the furniture. On the bed there are sometimes as many as five down comforters, covered in blue, gold, or flowered satin – one to serve as the cover for the night, the others to be put under the sleeper.²⁷

Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, describing the comfortable rooms of the functionaries, added some remarks about many "feminine" items and details and about pink being the favorite color of women living there.

It is important to realize that it was easier in the camps to acquire a new piece of wardrobe than to mend an old one, and the source of new clothes was the same for everybody, the transports of Jews to their final destination. This means that the prisoners, and in fact also the authors of memoirs, were most likely wearing blouses or sweaters of the luxurious, highest quality. However, the intended use of these objects was different than the enjoyment

²⁶ Szmaglewska, *Dymy nad Birkenau*, 259.

²⁷ Kossak, *Z otchłani*, 118.

described above; “ordinary” prisoners needed warm clothes to save their body, not to pamper it. The same can be said about expensive cosmetics (as only those were brought to the camps) from which only lipsticks were referred to favorably. Unlike perfumes used only by the functionaries, lipsticks were used by prisoners, who were coloring with them their cheeks to look healthier and have a better chance to survive “selections.”

In 1945, Henryk Korotyński, another Auschwitz survivor, compared the concentration camp to a large city with its social life and structure based on different classes.²⁸ While the aristocracy comprised of functionaries and the so called “old numbers,” the next class, bourgeois was composed by those prisoners who became rich by collecting and trading gold, diamonds and luxury objects brought to Auschwitz by Jews exterminated there. Several other authors, including Tadeusz Borowski, shared the same view of the camp and its structure, and luxury items were seen by prisoners primarily as a means to achieve the “bourgeois” status, with its accompanying lack of taste and questionable moral values. But luxury items, in their gendered variety, played also many other important and complex roles in the camps, as I hope I was able to show in this paper. Above all, the categories of gender and luxury allow for the re-reading of the memoirs of the camps from a new perspective, one that not only originates outside of the system but also brings to the fore issues situated at the intersection of gender, class, and race.

²⁸ Henryk Korotyński, “Kiedy będziemy znali Oświęcim,” *Odrodzenie* 34 (1947): 2.

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Filling the Blanks

A Missing Voice: Women Survivors of the Strasshof Transports from Hungary to Austria

ELEONORE LAPPIN-EPPEL

The Strasshof Transports

On March 19th, 1944 the German *Wehrmacht* occupied Hungary. At the time Hungarian racist laws classified close to 800,000 people living in the country as Jews. Between May 14th and July 9th, 1944 more than 430,000 Hungarian Jews were deported from Hungary, the overwhelming majority to Auschwitz.¹ These deportations did not go unnoticed. Under the impression of criticism of the Vatican, the King of Sweden, the American president, and high-ranking members of the Hungarian churches as well as severe American bombings of Budapest, but also out of fear of a coup d'état by the fascist Arrow Cross party Hungary's long-term head of state, Miklós Horthy, stopped the deportations temporarily on July 7th, 1944. At this point the Jewish population of the Hungarian province had already been deported. Horthy's stop of the deportations spared approximately 200,000 Jewish men and women living in Budapest. Furthermore, the Hungarian minister of defense Lajos Csáthy had signed an agreement with the Germans that the Hungarian army

¹ László Varga, "Ungarn," in *Dimension des Völkermords*, ed. Wolfgang Benz (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1991), 344.

would keep 150,000 Jews in the labor service of the Hungarian army. Although this scheme to keep Jewish manpower in Hungary and under the control of the Hungarian ministry of defense was not carried out completely, it saved 80,000 Jewish men from being deported.²

Most of the deportees were taken to Auschwitz where three quarters of them were sent to the gas chambers on arrival. However, 15,000 men, women and children from the ghettos of Szolnok, Debrecen, Szeged, and Baja, were sent to Strasshof an der Nordbahn near Vienna, Austria.³ The reason for these deportations was twofold. The *Gauleitungen* (Provincial Administrations of the Nazi Party) of Vienna and Niederdonau (Lower Austria) urgently needed slave laborers and suggested to the Reich's Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt RSHA) in Berlin to send Hungarian Jews to Austria rather than to Auschwitz. The RSHA agreed, but the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler also had his own plans with the Hungarian slave laborers in Austria: sparing thousands of Jews from annihilation in Auschwitz should be a "sign of good will" to the Western allies with whom he wanted to reach a separate peace in order to save Nazi Germany from military defeat.⁴ Therefore the Jewish laborer in Austria served a double function: on the one hand, they were slave laborers of the *Gauleitungen*, and on the other hand, they acted as Himmler's pawns in his attempts to negotiate with the Western allies. This double function also determined their living and working conditions: they were exploited for heavy

² Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 326, 338.

³ Szabolcs Szita, "Ungarische Zwangsarbeiter in Niederösterreich [Niederdonau] 1944–1945," *Unsere Heimat, Zeitschrift des Vereines für Landeskunde von Niederösterreich* 63, no. 1 (1992): 31–50, 34–35.

⁴ For these negotiations see: Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933–1945* (New Haven: London: Yale University Press, 1994), 145–251; Ladislav Löb, *Rezső Kasztner, The Daring Rescue of Hungarian Jews: A Survivor's Account* (London: Random House, 2009).

and dangerous work, undernourished and housed in miserable quarters; but at the same time, the SS took certain precautions like a rudimentary health service to keep the majority of them alive. Despite the hardships they had to endure during their labor deployment, and despite thousands of deaths in the chaotic final phase of the war when the workers were “evacuated” to the Terezín, Mauthausen, and Gunskirchen camps, about three quarters of the deportees survived.⁵

Historical Research on the Strasshof Transports

So far historical research has focused on the persecution of Jews in Hungary and their deportations to Auschwitz.⁶ Yehuda Bauer who wrote an excellent study of the negotiations between representatives of Hungarian Jewry and the SS and Himmler’s attempts to negotiate with the Western allies deals with the train with close to 1,700 Jews that was released from Hungary and allowed to go first to Bergen-Belsen camp and later to Switzerland, but not with the Strasshof transports.⁷ The Hungarian historian Szabolcs Szita has dealt with the fate of the Strasshof transports in Austria in articles and chapters of books.⁸ Tzvi

⁵ For this final phase see: Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, *Ungarisch-jüdische Zwangsarbeiter und Zwangsarbeiterinnen in Österreich 1944/45: Arbeitsinsatz – Todesmärsche – Folgen* (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2010), 161-202; Braham, *Politics of Genocide*, 654; Bauer, *Jews for Sale*, 201.

⁶ See for example: Braham, *Politics of Genocide*; *The Destruction of Hungarian Jewry: A Documentary Account*, 2 vols. (New York: Pro Arte, 1963); David Cesarani ed., *Genocide and Rescue: The Holocaust in Hungary 1944* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Christian Gerlach and Götz Aly, *Das letzte Kapitel: Der Mord an den ungarischen Juden 1944/45* (Stuttgart, München: DVA, 2002); Jenő Lévai, *Eichmann in Budapest: Dokumente* (Budapest: Pannonia, 1961).

⁷ Bauer, *Jews for Sale*, 145-251.

⁸ Szabolcs Szita, *Verschleppt, verhungert, vernichtet: Die Deportation von ungarischen Juden auf das Gebiet des annektierten Österreich 1944–1945* (Vienna: Werner Eichbauer Verlag, 1999); *Zwangsarbeit, Todesmärsche, Überleben durch Hilfe: Die österreichische Bevölkerung in*

Nassi published a book-length study of the experience of the Strasshof transports in Austria based on dozens of interviews the author conducted with survivors in Israel, many of them women of different ages.⁹ The author of this article has tried to show the connection between the negotiations between the Jews and SS in Hungary and at the Swiss border, as well as the fate of the Strasshof transports.¹⁰ Although the majority of the members of these transports were women – among the 15,011 deportees to Strasshof there were only 6,889 men (41%)

der Erinnerung der ungarischen Deportierten und politischen Häftlinge 1944–1945 (Budapest: Velcsov, 2004).

⁹ Tzvi Nassi, *Hahaglayah: edujot mi gorshim mihungaria leaustria betkufat hashoah* (Jerusalem: Hafakah MShKA, 1995).

¹⁰ Eleonore Lappin, “Das Schicksal ungarisch-jüdischer Zwangsarbeiter in Wien 1944/45,” in *Studien zur Geschichte der Juden in Österreich*, eds. Martha Keil and Klaus Lohrmann (Vienna, Cologne, Weimar: Philo, 1994), 140–165; “Der Weg ungarischer Juden nach Theresienstadt,” in *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 1996* (Prague: Sefer-Terezin Initiative Institute 1996), 52–81; “Giving Survivors a Voice,” in *Beyond Camps and Forced Labor: Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution*, eds. Johannes-Dieter Steinert and Inge Weber-Newth (Osnabrück: Seccolo Verlag, 2005), 246–259; “Stichwort ‘Todesmärsche,’” in *Sowjets, Schwarzmarkt, Staatsvertrag. Stichwörter zu Niederösterreich 1945 bis 1955*, eds. Ernst Langthaler and Stefan Eminger (St. Pölten: NP Buchverlag 2005), 220–225; “Die Deportationen ungarischer Juden nach Theresienstadt,” in *Theresienstädter Gedenkbuch: Österreichische Jüdinnen und Juden in Theresienstadt 1942–1945*, eds. DÖW and Institut Theresienstädter Initiative (Prague: Institut Theresienstädter Initiative, 2005), 113–145; “Ungarische Jüdinnen und Juden in Theresienstadt. Das Schicksal ‘privilegierter’ jüdischer Arbeitssklavinnen,” in *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 2005*, eds. Jaroslava Milotová, Michael Wögerbauer (Prague: Sefer-Terezin Initiative Institute, 2005), 150–165; “Ungarische Juden in Niederösterreich 1944/45,” in *Ungarisch-jüdische Zwangsarbeiterinnen und Zwangsarbeiter in Niederösterreich 1944/45*, eds. Eleonore Lappin, Susanne Uslu-Pauer and Manfred Wieninger (St. Pölten: NP Verlag 2006), 11–102; “Die Opfer von Hofamt Priel – Namen, Tagebücher und autobiographische Berichte (Edition),” in *ibid.*, 133–173; Lappin-Eppel, *Ungarisch-jüdische Zwangsarbeiter*, 57–202.

compared to 9,812 women (59%) – so far no research has been done from a gender perspective.¹¹

This lacuna cannot be explained by a lack of sources. Most of the documents concerning this labor deployment generated by the Nazi administration have been destroyed, but there is a plethora of testimonies, reports, autobiographical texts, interviews of survivors, as well as diaries and letters written by deportees. The collection of this source material started almost immediately after the war. When survivors returned to Budapest the National Committee for Attending Deportees (Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság DEGOB) interviewed about 5,000 of them and kept written records.¹² In Austria, during the first years survivors also gave testimonies in Austrian court cases against perpetrators of crimes against Hungarian Jews in Hungary and in Austria, however only three trials dealt with the Strasshof transports.¹³ Over the years archives in countries where Hungarian Jewish survivors moved to after their liberation, particularly in Israel and in the US, compiled impressive collections of testimonies not only in Hungarian, but also in English, Hebrew, German, and Yiddish. Hundreds of Hungarian Jewish survivors were also interviewed in the context of big audio-visual projects like that of the Shoah Foundation started in 1994.¹⁴ Since the 1980's, an impressive number of autobiographies of survivors of the Strasshof transports has been published in Hungarian, German, and English.

Therefore it begs the question why comparatively so few historians paid attention to the Strasshof transports in general, and to the experience of the women deportees in particular. It seems

¹¹ Szita, "Ungarische Zwangsarbeiter in Niederösterreich," 34-35.

¹² This collection is kept in the Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), Jerusalem, Israel. The mostly Hungarian transcripts of interviews can be found on the Internet: <http://degob.org/> (2013/12/06).

¹³ The files of the "People's Courts" (*Volksgerichte*) that dealt with specific Nazi crimes are today in the Municipal and Provincial Archive of Vienna (Wiener Stadt-und Landesarchiv, WStLA).

¹⁴ <http://www.dornsife.usc.edu/vhi/locator>.

that compared with the terrible fate of the majority of Hungarian Jews who were deported to Auschwitz, the Strasshof transports were an exception that is difficult to deal with. They were – as some survivors phrased it – the “fortunate deportees.”¹⁵ Despite the great hardships they had to endure, their suffering paled in comparison to the fate of those shipped to Auschwitz – after all, three quarters of the Strasshof transports survived, among them many children and elderly people who would not have passed selections in Auschwitz. They were kept together with their family members, and many of them were even spared the detention in concentration camps or death marches. Even the living and working conditions of the Hungarian Jewish fortification workers that were sent to Austria after the coup d’état of the Arrow Cross Party (Nyílas) in October 1944 were much worse and their death rate considerably higher.¹⁶ Therefore survivors of the Strasshof transports often consider themselves as “second rate victims” who – so they think – did not suffer enough to even talk about it.¹⁷

The Strasshof transports owe their survival to the wish of Heinrich Himmler and certain members of the SS to keep them alive. It is generally accepted that the negotiations of the Jewish “Aid and Rescue Committee” with the SS led to the liberation of 1,650 Jews who were allowed to leave Hungary and after a few months’ waiting period in a special camp of Bergen-Belsen went on to Switzerland in December 1944.¹⁸ However, the fact that the 15,000 Jews sent to Austria were also kept alive due to these

¹⁵ Fischer, *Hauptsache wir leben*, 44.

¹⁶ For a comparison see: Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, “Deportations of Hungarian Jews to Austria (1944/45),” in *Jewish Studies at the CEU VII* 2009-2011, eds. András Kovacs and Michael Miller (Budapest: CEU, 2013), 63-82.

¹⁷ This attitude becomes very clear in the documentary film *Killing Kasztner*. Although this film deals with survivors of the Kasztner train that was released to Switzerland via Bergen Belsen, this dilemma is also expressed by survivors of the Strasshof transports.

¹⁸ Ibid; Löb, *Reszö Kasztner*; Bauer, *Jews for Sale*.

negotiations is still contested. The reason for this is that the few documents from the Nazi era referring to the Strasshof transports deal with the labor deployment controlled by the *Gauleitungen*.¹⁹ The few documents relating to the role of the SS show that they imposed strict orders to treat the Hungarian Jews as *Schutzhäftlinge*, i.e. like Gestapo-prisoners, and kept them in closed guarded camps.²⁰ It is proof that the Strasshof transports were indeed pawns in Himmler's attempts to negotiate with the Western allies, and therefore enjoyed slightly better living conditions and chances for survival than the rest of the Hungarian Jewish deportees. This information can be gathered only from autobiographical texts or interviews of survivors. That the majority of these testimonies was given by men, might be an explanation why gender and women issues have been neglected so far.

The Structure of the Strasshof Transports

Most of the documents of the Nazi administration concerning the camps for Hungarian Jews in Vienna and Lower Austria have been destroyed at the end of the war. Only one list of the camps in *Gau Groß-Wien* was saved and used as evidence in the post-war trial against Siegfried Seidl, former commandant of Terezin camp, a member of Adolf Eichmann's special commando unit in

¹⁹ The most well-known document is the letter of the head of the RSHA, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, to the mayor of Vienna, Hanns Blachke, announcing the arrival of 12,000 Hungarian Jews. See: Brief des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, an den Bürgermeister von Wien, SS-Brigadeführer Blaschke vom 30.6.1944, Dok. 3803-PS, in *Der Prozeß gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Gerichtshof Nürnberg* (Nuremberg 1947), 33,168-169.

²⁰ Austrian Resistance Archive (Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes DÖW) E 21.204, Richtlinien über die Behandlung ungarischer Juden vom 9.8.1944, Anlage 4: Anweisung des Befehlshabers der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD in Ungarn – Sondereinsatzkommando – Außenkommando Wien für die Einweisung der Judenpolizei vom 29. Juni 1944.

Hungary that planned and controlled the deportations, and second in charge of the SS unit controlling the Hungarian Jewish slave laborers in Austria.²¹ This undated list was probably put together in the summer of 1944. It shows that of the 5,972 Hungarian Jews in Vienna 1,722 were men (29%), 3,253 women (54%), and 997 children (17%).²² In March 1945, a train with 1,072 Hungarian slave laborers was sent to Terezín. Among these deportees 23.3% were children and 17.4% above the age of sixty, 64.9% were women.²³ For this transport the Nazis had selected families with more than four children and/or an over-proportionate number of members unable to work. The percentage of children, women, and elderly is therefore slightly over-proportionate. Nevertheless, taken together the Vienna and the Terezín lists reflect the specific age and gender distribution of the Strasshof transports: a high percentage of women, children and elderly with comparatively few men of working age. Despite this age and gender distribution, 68% of the Hungarian Jewish deportees in Vienna were working.²⁴ This high percentage of workers was reached because children above the age of ten and elderly people were forced to work. Children had to do heavy, physical labor. Because of their slight build, women and children were often sent into recently bombed buildings to look for valuables and corpses: work that was dangerous as well as nerve-wracking.²⁵ Many elderly deportees volunteered for work that was too hard for them because the food rations of those unable to work were cut. Old and frail deportees therefore had the choice between hunger and overwork. As can be seen from the records

²¹ WStLA Landesgericht für Strafsachen (Provincial Criminal Court, LG) als Volksgericht (as People's Court, Vg) 1b Vr 770/46. Siegfried Seidl was convicted to death and executed.

²² Ibid.

²³ Institute Terezín Initiative, Prague, List of transport IV/16 from Vienna (=Strasshof) on 03.08.1945.

²⁴ List of camps in Vienna, WStLA LG Wien Vg 1b Vr 770/46.

²⁵ István Hargittai, *Our Lives, Encounters of a Scientist* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2004), 54-55.

of the Viennese Jewish cemetery, they were the group with the highest death rate.²⁶

When the SS loaded the trains to Auschwitz and to Strasshof they took care to deport families and members of communities together.²⁷ In Austria, employers had to take whole families, those that were able to work together with those unable to work. For workers they had to pay certain fees to the SS, but they were allowed to deduct costs of food and housing for those unable to work.²⁸ That families and acquaintances could stay and work together created a certain social stability. Therefore, despite the drastic change of living conditions and personal status as well as social roles and values, including gender roles and religious norms, remained intact. Women whose husbands were in the army had to take care of their children, but often also of elderly relatives like parents and in-laws.²⁹ They were looking for extra food and medicine for their dependents, but also tried to continue giving their children some kind of education.³⁰

Analyzing Testimonies from a Gender Perspective

Testimonies of survivors give a good insight into the living and working conditions of the deportees and their responses to their difficult situation. These personal testimonies also reflect gender

²⁶ Friedhofsamt der Israelitischen Kultusgemeinde Wien. Hungarian Jews who died in Vienna and its surrounding were buried at the New Jewish Cemetery, Zentralfriedhof, 4. Tor.

²⁷ Braham, *Politics of Genocide*, 646, 661 fn. 43 and 45.

²⁸ Austrian Resistance Archive (Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes (DÖW) E 19.829, Anordnung über die Beschäftigung von Juden, erlassen vom Präsident des Gauarbeitsamtes und Reichstreuhand der Arbeit für Niederdonau, Alfred Proksch, June 27 1944.

²⁹ Interview with Tzvi Nassi by Andrea Barnea, Moreshet Archive, Givat Haviva, Israel A.1510.

³⁰ See: Lappin, "Die Opfer von Hofamt Priel."

roles. They show how women, men, and children saw themselves, their duties, their hopes and their suffering, but also how they perceived the other members of their group and the Austrian population. Although the Jewish deportees seem to have lost everything when they were jammed into trains in Hungary and sent to work in Austria, they were by no means a homogeneous group. When analyzing their different responses and survival strategies not only gender but also class, religious denomination as well as generation and family status have to be taken into account. Fathers tell different stories from their sons, daughters, and wives although they were deported in the same train and deployed to work for the same firm. Orthodox deportees find other events worth remembering and reporting than secular ones. Autobiographies give us personal stories, but they are also reflections of social class. The writing of memoirs is primarily a middle-class occupation. Members of the working class, farmers but also Orthodox Jews are much less inclined to produce autobiographical texts.³¹ The typical female author of an autobiographical text is middle class and secular or religiously liberal. Interviews have less of this class bias as they reach interviewees who would never write texts but are willing and able to tell their stories. Nevertheless, we have to be aware of the fact that in all sorts of testimonies, memoirs, reports, interviews etc. Orthodox or lower class women are underrepresented. As these groups represent a numerically important part of Jewish society, we have to actively look for their testimonies and contextualize them accordingly. For example, the fact that religious praxis is mentioned only rarely in testimonies does not mean that a considerable part of the deportees was Orthodox and that religious practice was important for them.

As I have mentioned before, the majority of authors of autobiographical texts are men. Also letters and diaries written by women at the time of deportation are rarer than those of men. Nevertheless the existent body of memoirs and interviews by women is large

³¹ Magdalene Heuser ed., *Autobiographien von Frauen: Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte* (Tübingen: Niemayer, 1996).

enough to allow us to reconstruct their history. Sometimes memoirs written by sons and daughters of deportees help to understand gender roles of their mothers as well as of themselves.

Still, the paucity of published autobiographies by women survivors of the Strasshof transports begs an explanation. After the war many women found themselves widows as their husbands either had been killed during army service or deported. The lucky ones who were reunited with their husbands returned to their roles of mothers and wives in an economically, socially, and politically turbulent period. Many survivors left Hungary and started a new life abroad. Their understandable wish to build up a new existence, to raise their children and to return to normality resulted in silence about their war experiences. Post-war societies in Hungary, Israel or the United States, where most Hungarian Jews lived were – for different reasons – not soliciting their testimonies for other than academic purposes. These written or recorded interviews were diligently collected and stored but rarely used for analytical research. Widespread interest in the Holocaust came late; as a response an impressive number of autobiographies were published starting in the 1980's. The interest in the stories of Holocaust survivors came at a time when the child survivors came of retirement age. With more time at their hands they started to recapitulate their life and to write about it, either for their family or for a broader audience. Their memoirs also reflect the role of their mothers during deportation. The stories about mothers are influenced by the gender of the narrator: sons tend to depict them as selfless heroines and themselves as their partners trying to substitute for their absent fathers.³² Girls see less a break but rather a continuation of gender roles and their relations with their mothers. Growing up and watching the older girls and young women is important for them. While boys who were deported without their fathers often felt that they had to become grown-up men without role models, girls critically watched the women community around

³² See for instance: Porat, *Power of Faith*; Fischer, *Hauptsache wir leben*.

them. This perspective is wonderfully captured in Maria Ember's autobiographical novel *Hajtúkanyar*.³³ Why Ember is "hiding" herself behind a male protagonist can only be guessed, but it points to the difficulty women survivors had to speak openly about their experience as slave laborers. The fictional genre of a novel gives Ember the freedom to talk quite openly about the life in an industrial forced labor camp in Vienna. In her book she shows that the women still used their former ways of personal interaction and that class and social status were still in force. Ember also shows that even under conditions of severely restricted freedom of movement – the workers lived on the area of the industrial compound they worked in and were not allowed to leave it, her protagonist strives for his/her independence from the watchful eyes of the mother. The hardship of the existence as slave laborers did not impede the normal emotional and intellectual development of a young teenager.

Although book-length autobiographies of Hungarian Jewish women who had been deported to Austria are rare, there are a substantial number of testimonies, reports or interviews that enable us to reconstruct their history. When dealing with the history of female Hungarian Jewish slave laborers in Austria, the category of gender has to be supplemented by the category of age. Children, young girls and grown-up women each experienced and remember their deportation in different ways. As these stories are written or testimonies are given at a time when all eyewitnesses are grown-up and frequently even elderly women, these differences are often blurred but they are essential for an understanding of the narratives.

As the deportees came from the Hungarian province, a considerable part of them were Orthodox. Although there are only very few reports from Orthodox Jews, men or women, it is important to look at their experience. As not only families, but also communities, were

³³ Maria Ember, *Hajtúkanyar* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1974). For this article the author used the German edition: Maria Ember, *Schleuderkurve* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1988).

kept together in their camps Orthodox men could form *minyanim* and maintain at least part of their usual religious practice. Some groups managed to organize Shabbat and holiday services after work. Frequently Orthodox men would say the appropriate prayers while working.³⁴ Circumventing Nazi rules and maintaining a religious life-style gave the men agency. Women and children are more likely to tell how religious practice was made possible – or impeded – by their employers, which means that they show their dependency on their non-Jewish environment.³⁵ While for men religious services were central, women had to grapple with dietary laws.³⁶ In most camps elderly women unfit for hard work were ordered to do the cooking. This did not mean that dietary laws could be kept as they received the meager raw material from their employers who were restricted to a small choice of victuals allowed by the authorities. The Jewish workers usually lost about ten kilograms during their first weeks in Austria.³⁷ In late summer the quality and quantity of food improved, but they never got enough food and were always hungry.³⁸ Under these conditions it was very hard to give up the little meat they got from time to time. Therefore, the topic of dietary laws seems to be something like a taboo as they are only mentioned when they were kept.³⁹ Religious practice was an important counterbalance

³⁴ Porat, *The Triumph of Faith*, 77, 81-83.

³⁵ Report of Zelda Minz (o. Münz), born 1936 in Makó, Yad Vashem Archive (YVA) 03/7627.

³⁶ Diary of Jozsef Bihary, entries 09.23.1944 (Yom Kippur) and 10.01.1944 (Sukkot) in Lappin, "Hofamt Priel," 149-151; Moshe Porat, *The Triumph of Faith: In the Mauthausen Death March* (Jerusalem: Eliner Library/World Zionist Organization, 1991), 77-78, 80-81; Leslie's Diary [László Fraenkel, born 1925], Moreshet D. 1680.

³⁷ Testimony of Dr. Theodor Friedländer, WStLA LG Wien Vg 1b Vr 770/46.

³⁸ Leslie's Diary [László Fraenkel, born 1925], Moreshet D.1680.

³⁹ Interview with Tzvi Nassi by Jolan (Bluma) Klein, née Strausz, 1927, Makó, Moreshet A.1523; Interview with Tzvi Nassi by Lea Schwarz-Mannsdorf, born 1905, Debrecen, Moreshet A.1526; Interview with Tzvi Nassi by Frida Grosz, born 1906, Debrecen, Moreshet A.1515; Report of Zelda Minz (o. Münz), born 1936 in Makó, Yad Vashem Archive (YVA) 03/7627.

to the daily humiliation the Jews had to endure. Keeping religious laws meant self-determination and gave them self-respect. Jewish men deprived of their usual role as breadwinners and protectors of their families could maintain their position within the context of religion. Religion also strengthened gender roles as men and women had their own religious spheres to take care of, their own often difficult and painful decisions to make. An Austrian policeman in Gmünd in Lower Austria understood the importance of religion. In order to show respect to two Jewish women he gave them fruit and nuts rather than bread during Passover.⁴⁰

Most survivors of the Strasshof transports who wrote autobiographies or gave interviews and testimonies were suddenly uprooted from middle-class lives and forced into the degrading existence of slave laborers, of sub-humans according to Nazi ideology. Hunger, the lack of proper washing facilities, their ragged clothes, and torn shoes gave them an outward appearance that seemed to substantiate the Nazi propaganda. And yet, autobiographies and testimonies show that to quite an impressive degree they managed to save their social values and roles as well as rudimentary forms of their former lifestyle. Again the fact that families and communities were deported together helped. In their cramped living quarters several families had to share rooms. The lack of privacy was made bearable by moving together with relatives and friends and form little “communities,” as Peter Cukor who was deported at the age of eight from Szolnok to a big industrial plant in Vienna together with his mother, aunt and grandmother, describes in his memoir: “In setting up our first living quarters we established with one of our friends a community of two extended families. We were to stay together through the entire time and through our many moves from quarter to quarter in the work camp.”⁴¹ The two families lived in four triple-decker bunk beds, sometimes, but not always, supplemented by closets. This was home for them and offered some kind of consoling “normality.” Many

⁴⁰ Report of Zippora Klein, born in Budapest 1929, YVA 03/5926.

⁴¹ Peter Cukor, *Before the Silver Cord Is Snapped: Looking Back on My Journey* (Philadelphia: Xlibris Corporation, 2004), 64.

camps did not offer beds or closets, but also under such conditions families tried to build their “homes” by simply staying together and forming “communities” behind improvised curtains that separated them from their neighbors. “Normality” also meant maintaining gender roles. József Bihari, born in 1883, was deported from Debrecen without his wife who apparently was shipped to Auschwitz. In his diary Bihari expresses his longing and concern for his wife but also shows his unwillingness to give up all male prerogatives. Although he is ailing, he is volunteering for heavy work, but he asks Mrs. Krausz, a fellow inmate, to do his laundry. Mrs. Krausz has to take care of her children and certainly needs Bihari’s payment for this service.⁴²

Nevertheless, certain rules of behavior had to be broken in order to survive. The most important survival strategy was begging. When they had a chance to leave their camp either on their way to work or secretly, deportees begged for food or money to buy extra supplies. Children were the most successful beggars as civilians felt pity for them. Begging was so important that most deportees saw it under the aspect of agency rather than humiliation. While child survivors tell how they roamed the streets looking for some benefactor, women were more likely to look for assistance from non-Jewish co-workers or superiors. Young mothers frequently mention assistance by non-Jewish colleagues who helped them out with food or medicine for their children. Older girls and young women also befriended prisoners of war – most frequently Italian or French – who supplied them with food from the packages they received from home and with important news about the progress of the allied forces. Although young women and mothers describe the great importance this assistance had for their and their family’s survival, they never mention emotional or sexual relation.⁴³ Extra-marital affairs of Jewish women are another taboo in testimonies and autobiographies. Teenage girls often talk about love affairs between older friends and prisoners of war, which they watched

⁴² Lappin, “Die Opfer von Hofamt Priel,” 146.

⁴³ Interview with Tzvi Nassi by Andrea Barnea, Moreshet A.1510; Report of K.R. to the author, 1995.

but to their regret could not emulate because of their young age.⁴⁴ Other big taboos are prostitution and rapes.⁴⁵ Rapes committed by Russian soldiers are a recurrent topic in testimonies of girls and women, who, however, claim that they only watched them.⁴⁶ Even more sensitive and rarely mentioned are rapes committed by Austrians that are seen as utmost humiliation of helpless women.⁴⁷

Testimonies of survivors of the Strasshof transports give a fascinating insight into the functioning of Jewish society under duress. The labor deployment in Austria was tough and a full quarter of the deportees did not survive. Still, the living and working conditions allowed a tenuous “normality” because families and members of communities were kept together. However, the deportees had a very specific age and gender distribution: men of military age – the fathers – were mostly absent serving in the Hungarian army. Women were not only faced with slave labor under extremely hard conditions. They also had to function as heads of extended families consisting of their children and often also elderly relatives. At the same time, they had to fulfill their usual gender role as nurturing, caring mothers and daughters. While women had no choice but to fulfill these multiple tasks, men could to a large extent stick to their gender roles. Even their employers treated them accordingly. While elderly women were usually detailed with watching the small children or doing household chores, men who were unable to do the heavy work were not called upon to do such jobs. Ego-documents show that these gender roles were also accepted among the deportees. As their deportation lasted only ten months and because families and members of Jewish communities were kept together they could preserve their social stratification and gender roles.

⁴⁴ Interview with Tzvi Nassi by Jolan (Bluma) Klein, née Strausz, 1927, Makó, Moreshet A.1523.

⁴⁵ Ember, *Schleuderkurve*, 220.

⁴⁶ Report of Eva Galambos, born 1937 in Debrecen, to the author, 1995.

⁴⁷ Anonymous letter to the author, 1995.

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Holocaust in Women's Lives: Approaching a Slovak Oral History Archive

MONIKA VRZGULOVÁ

From 1948 to 1989, studies of the Holocaust and the Slovak State (1939-1945) were prone to ideological pressures and Communist interpretations of history. Facts were being concealed, misinterpreted or simply “did not exist.”¹ The fate of Slovakia's Jewish population was a taboo, as noticeably absent from public discourse as from the majority's private, family and collective memories. Ironically, a similar taboo took hold in the Jewish community with respect to remembering and discussing the Holocaust-era – both within the Jewish community and with respect to informing the majority population.

Ideological pressure likewise burdened academic research, though, ironically, it was during the 1970s that the cornerstone of Slovak historiography concerning the 1939-1945 Slovak Republic emerged. That classic piece of academic work was not, however, published as a separate monograph until after 1989.² Further

¹ The writing of this article was supported by the Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Academy of Sciences as a part of project no. 2/0122/08 called “Urban Environment as a Space of Diversity” and project no. 2/0092/11 “Folk Knowledge and its Social and Cultural Conditions,” conducted at the Institute of Ethnology SAS, Bratislava.

² The book was published after 1989 also in English as: Ivan Kamenec, *On the Trail of Tragedy: The Holocaust in Slovakia* (Bratislava: H & H, 2007).

taboos were broken, and gaps in Slovakia's history were filled, by the first international qualitative research carried out in Slovakia under the supervision of the Slovak Milan Šimečka Foundation.³ The project, *Oral History – the Fate of Those Who Survived the Holocaust*, lasted two years (1995–1997).

Our first phase, recording Holocaust survivors' testimonies, finished in 1997 and immediately we began transcribing, analyzing and interpreting the collected interviews.⁴ This phase is ongoing – as are follow-up interviews with survivors, and original interviews with survivors who have not previously provided their testimony. The entire corpus of recordings is composed of survivors' individual recollections, all linked to their experience of the Holocaust. For researchers, these Holocaust studies encompass a number of different topics as well as bring a sum of methodological, interpretative, professional, and human challenges.

Following 1989, Slovak historiography as well as social sciences started devoting an increased amount of attention to researching the Holocaust and managed to do so without ideological bias.⁵ Nevertheless, a gender-based approach to the study of this phenomenon only rarely occurs in academic works.⁶ In Slovakia,

³ See more about the non-governmental organization at: www.nadaciamilanasiamecku.sk.

⁴ In 2011, the entire sum of testimonies stored in the archive of the Milan Šimečka Foundation (MSF) was professionally processed and catalogued – transcripts now contain keywords, were professionally analyzed, footnoted, and made available to the professional public for educational purposes. There are together 149 Jewish and 75 Roma interviews.

⁵ For more on the issue of reflecting the Holocaust in Slovak historiography, see: Eduard Nižňanský, "Reflections of the Holocaust in Slovak historiography," in *Holocaust as a Historical and Moral Problem of the Past and the Present: Current Stage of Research*, eds. Monika Vrzgulová et al. (Bratislava: Holocaust Documentation Centre and the Office of the Government of the SR, 2008), 152–167.

⁶ In this context it is necessary to mention especially the work of historian Katarína Hradská dedicated to the activities of Giselle Fleischmann, a representative of the Illegal Working Group, which operated in Slovakia between 1942–1944.

women's history or women's testimonies have, so far, been analyzed predominantly by teams of women working at the organization Aspekt or the Centre of Gender Studies at Comenius University (CGS).⁷ So far, the issue of women and the Holocaust in Slovakia has been dealt with in three publications.⁸

While research on women in the Holocaust generally had begun in the 1980s, when Holocaust studies reached somewhat of a climax, in Slovakia the issue only began to be dealt with several years ago. In 2007, historian Hana Klamková, presented an overview of key academic works, which contributed to the spread and establishment of a gender-oriented approach within Holocaust studies.

As she pointed out, at the beginning gender-focused research was based on two postulates. The first postulate centered on the question of whether Nazi misogynic behavior could have led to dual oppression of Jewish women: first because they belonged

⁷ Aspekt was established in the 1990s as an "interest group of women who thought it was time to take the talk about equality and democracy seriously and apply these principles to reality, to the lives of Slovak women." <http://www.aspekt.sk/content/zzz-aspekt>. At the same time, Aspekt is a feminist education and publishing center, which publishes its own journal, has its own publications and a website. CGS was founded in June 2001 at Comenius University in Bratislava as the first academic institution in the Slovak Republic aiming to perform research in, as well as educate in, the field of gender studies. This interdisciplinary discipline focuses on relationships between sexes in different areas of life as well as on its theoretical background. It also deals with issues of gender identity, gender-specific differences, stereotypes, and symbols that fundamentally structure the nature of relationships between men and women, and determine the inequalities between them. Activities of the Center for Gender Studies are based on a decade-long tradition of like-minded teaching and research activities, which were conducted at the Department of Philosophy and History of Philosophy at Comenius University in cooperation with expert practitioners, both male and female, from other disciplines.

⁸ Zuzana Kiczková et al., *Women's Memory: On The Experience of Self-Constructing in Biographical Narratives* (Bratislava: Iris. 2006); Jana Cviková, Jana Juránová and Ľubica Kobová, eds., *Histórie žien: aspekty čítania a písania* (Bratislava: Aspekt, 2007); Gabriela Dudeková et al., eds., *Na ceste k modernej žene* (Bratislava: Veda, 2011).

to the Jewish people (or the “Jewish race”) and secondly because they were women. This approach points to a specific gender-determined suffering under the Nazi regime of terror, which was associated with physicality and with physiological processes, but also with social norms and values reflecting and defining views of the period and the social status of women in German society, in our case the Slovak majority, as well as the Jewish minority. Here, issues associated with topics such as female nudity, forced prostitution, menstruation, pregnancy, and motherhood in German concentration and extermination camps, ghettos, and so on would be of focus. The second postulate claims that women and men reacted to, lived through and “processed” the impact and consequences of racial persecution in different ways. Klamková’s text was the starting point of my own research. I was working with women’s oral history testimonies collected in the archive of Milan Šimečka Foundation and I kept the two abovementioned postulates in mind when I was analyzing biographical narratives of Jewish women from Slovakia. As Joan Ringelheim argues – those who write about women during the Holocaust need to keep in mind that it is not possible to analyze the experiences of women (or men) during the Holocaust without understanding gender issues. We need studies which “reveal the ignored and complex relationship between anti-Semitism (as a form of racism against Jews) and sexism prior to and during the Holocaust.”⁹ This paper is my very first essay focused on women’s memories where I reflect on this postulate.

The Holocaust as a Part of Women’s Biographical Narratives

In the corpus of biographical narratives captured by the abovementioned project *Oral History – the Fate of Those Who Survived the Holocaust*, women’s testimonies represent almost a half of all

⁹ Joan Ringelheim, “Thoughts about Women and the Holocaust,” in *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 145.

interviews.¹⁰ First of all, it must be stated that the transcripts of women's biographical narratives from the Milan Šimečka Foundation archives do not represent a statistical sample in terms of numbers or the proportionality of representation of different groups of Jews in Slovakia. They are the result of a "rescue research" carried out in the years 1995-1997, when it was only possible to capture a fraction of the individual recollections of people, who were willing to tell their life story. There is an almost complete absence of representatives of Orthodox Jews in Slovakia, who, at the time of the research, simply did not live in Slovakia. Despite these shortcomings, the recorded narratives and testimonies provide us with information on the social status of Jewish women, their standing in the local community and the social climate of interwar Czechoslovakia.¹¹

When analyzing individual biographies of women, I focused on the way they reflected gender affiliation. I wondered what their recollections of surviving the Holocaust were and what gender information could be obtained from their narratives. I also studied these narratives in terms of historical periods to which they related – whereas I did not focus solely on the Holocaust, but also on the period before and after the Holocaust. I compared my findings with previously published outcomes of similarly-oriented research abroad. I worked with the concept of the *Holocaust*, which, after 1945, became a part of the Jewish (collective and individual) identity and also with the following key concepts: *identity*, *memory*, and *biographical narratives*.

I understand the concept of *identity* in a constructivist and contextual sense and I perceive it as a process and a collective phenomenon, indicating the fundamental equality of group members, whereas uniformity exists objectively or is experienced subjectively and is

¹⁰ The project's entire video archive is stored at the Milan Šimečka Foundation and consists of 148 recorded testimonies of Jewish survivors, of whom 70 are women.

¹¹ It is necessary to point out that not all female narrators identified themselves as Jewish before the adoption of racial legislation in Slovakia.

being manifested in a feeling of solidarity, a shared consciousness and collective action.¹² I understand collective identity as closely associated with the concept of social identity. I view this concept as the identity of an individual, which has been predetermined, assigned or adopted based on the individual's inclusion in a social group. In respect to the concept of identity, I specify its gender dimension. For me, gender identity represents a psychological construct that expresses the individual phenomenological experience of being masculine or feminine. In this respect, I view gender identity as a process of internally becoming aware of and experiencing one's gender, which incorporates the concepts and schemes of understanding gender, internal reception of standards and stereotypes, and also the emotional assessment of this gender competence.¹³

I use the term *memory*, or *collective memory*, as introduced by Maurice Halbwachs, who highlighted the strong dependency of the memory of an individual on his/her membership in a group or several groups and he made a direct link between the concept of memory and a group, identity and recollection. I use the term *memory* both in terms of its *contents* as well as in terms of *process* – remembering, forgetting and *memory media* – e.g. commemorative ceremonies, published texts, disseminated symbols, biographical narratives, etc.¹⁴

Biographical narratives are multilayer social texts, which entail “symbolic social worlds and subcultural narrative communities” and are always newly re-designed, carry a specific time stamp and symbolize the period they originated in.¹⁵ With respect to the issue

¹² Viera Bačová, “Úvod: Rodové identity ako kolektívne identity (Teoretické východiská),” in *My a tí druhí v modernej spoločnosti: Konštrukcie a transformácie kolektívnych identít*, eds. Gabriela Kiliánová, Eva Kowalska and Eva Krekovičová (Bratislava: Centrum excelentnosti SAV Procesy, Historický ústav SAV, Ústav etnológie SAV, VEDA, 2009), 39-43.

¹³ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴ Gabriela Kiliánová, “Bádanie o identite,” in *My a tí druhí v modernej spoločnosti*, eds. Gabriela Kiliánová, Eva Kowalska and Eva Krekovičová (Bratislava: VEDA, 2009), 13-16.

¹⁵ Kiczková et al., *Women's Memory*, 52.

under study, one has to ask: based on these women's testimonies, is it possible to find specific women-related topics and methods of voicing their own experiences from the Holocaust? Although we have to be cautious when "generalizing" and comparing male and female narratives in general, it is, nevertheless, possible to abstract gender-related themes, formulations and evaluations from the narratives. Therefore, narrative biographies represent interesting study material for socio-constructivist gender research. These biographies provide a unique point of view of the narrator and the world, which surrounds her and are thus logically linked to gender. The life story then is a reflection of social reality with rich social connections and gender relations. The testimony is composed of descriptions of specific events that logically contain a gender perspective. As Zuzana Kiczková notes "gender is being shaped, reproduced and changed during processing and reconstructing the biographical experience and is always individually and inter-actively generated in specific situations (doing gender)."¹⁶

Characteristically, biographical narratives are constructed through their social ties. Women's biographies are defined through the closest, familiar world made up of family, kin and friendship ties. Thus, we learn about the relationship of the woman-narrator to the mother, father, relative, we learn about the female narrator's place in the family, in her circle of friends, in school, at work – as she constructs these relationships for herself and for us.

When analyzing the level of gender-determination in these biographical narratives, I focus on how they mirror the interviewees' experience with and self-reflection of femininity; how the biographies of women reflect the social status of women living in Slovakia during the period under study, especially Jewish women, and how they reflect the biological uniqueness of the female body and what are the ways and forms of constructing standards and models of femininity. How femininity, as defined during this historical period, is reflected in the biographical narratives of female

¹⁶ Ibid., 52.

Jewish Holocaust survivors; how gender-determination affects the fates of these women during the Holocaust and in what way women interpret this experience.

The Social Status of Women in Slovakia during the First Half of the 20th Century

Before I turn to the core of my study – constructions of the Holocaust experience in women's biographical narratives – I would like to define the social context in which these women lived. In a particular historical period every society has a set of clearly defined ideas about masculine and feminine ideals. What were the legal standards and ideas determining the ideal of a woman in the first half of the 20th century? Because the Slovak society during this era was structured and diversified, there is not, logically, just one “impartial” answer to this question. In general, however, the truth is that the patriarchal legal system gradually liberalized and democratized at the end of the 19th and early 20th century (as did the society as a whole). Nevertheless, traditional ideas and opinions were deeply rooted in the society and thus new ideas about the emancipation of women – both political and social – were being only slowly and partially accepted by society.

In comparison with the previous era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czechoslovak Republic brought a substantial qualitative change in defining women's social status. The Constitution of the first Czechoslovak Republic established the principle of political, social, and cultural equality among men and women, which included universal suffrage.¹⁷ The reality, however, often vastly differed from the legally guaranteed equality of both sexes. Women's everyday life during the interwar period in Slovakia

¹⁷ Suffrage and political equality of women were guaranteed by the law dated 29 February 1920 no. 121 Coll. Mária Mikulová, “Právne postavenie žien v Československej republike,” in *Histórie žien: aspekty čítania a písania*, eds. Jana Cviková, Jana Juráňová and Ľubica Kobová (Bratislava: Aspekt, 2007), 307–321.

was determined by the women's social status, social competence (working class, middle class, bourgeoisie), as well as by the locality she lived in (urban, rural). Stereotypes and traditional views on the role and place of women in family and society were changing only very slowly and the ideal of femininity was still based primarily on women's biological characteristics. First and foremost, a woman was to immerse herself in the role of a mother and to guard hearth and home, women were the ones who were to provide their children with high-quality national/civic education, and strengthen their confessional identity. As a consequence of these circumstances, women's access to education increased. Women were assigned to socially "appropriate" educational institutions and professions and they participated in public life by becoming involved in social activities (women were usually involved in awareness and education of women, charity and socio-cultural activities). Women in the first half of the 20th century, or, to be more precise, during the existence of the Czechoslovak Republic, were given room for self-fulfillment, which was defined by two poles: an employed, economically independent and educated woman versus a woman in the household, economically dependent on her father or husband, finding fulfillment in caring for her children and husband.

The declared civic, social, and political equality of women and men lasted less than twenty years. After the Hlinka Slovak People's Party took over power (6 October 1938), citizens' status within the state had rapidly changed – by introducing the principle of legal inequality. At the same time, women's rights were infringed upon by, for example, pushing them out of public, political, and economic life. The change in women's social status was declared by the regime in its Declaration of the Autonomous Government in February 1939. This is also where the following principle was adopted "married women should return to domesticity, where their place is."¹⁸ Jozef Tiso himself, who was then the Head of the

¹⁸ Katarína Zavacká, "Vládárstvo v rodine: Politika Slovenského štátu voči," in *História žien: aspekty čítania a písania*, eds. Jana Cviková, Jana Juráňová and Ľubica Kobová (Bratislava: Aspekt, 2007), 322-327.

Autonomous Government of the Slovak Country, said that the Slovak nation needs “healthy, strong, economically secure and properly extended families in order for them to create an existentially and spiritually powerful and unified core of the society, which could withstand life’s obstacles.”¹⁹ After the establishment of the Slovak state in March 1939, changes in civil rights and liberties were defined by the state’s constitution of July 1939. During the Slovak state, women were pushed back into the domestic family space, economic dependency, women’s access to education (especially higher) was constantly being debated and questioned and the sanctity of family was being strongly emphasized. Clear signals of change were the attempts to ensure the indissolubility of marriage by the Catholic Church and the government officials’ fight against abortion.²⁰

What was the status of Jewish women in Slovakia during the period under study? It varied as much as the majority women’s social status did. Nevertheless, one of the indicators was the woman’s and her family’s relationship to Judaism – this had much influence over Jewish women’s social status. When it came to traditional Jewish families, women’s standing was logically different from the status of women who lived in non-religious families, who were assimilated or those sympathizing with Zionism. As Jehuda Bauer points out: “[T]he public social standing of women living in traditional Orthodox Jewish families in Central and Eastern Europe was certainly lower than that of their husbands, fathers and brothers.... Although, in some areas, Orthodox Jewish women were economically active...their role in social and political life was, at best, secondary.”²¹ The establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) brought about a change, which had partly also effected the Jewish community, including the lives of Jewish women. Jewish women, middle class mothers, became involved in organizing social activities and their daughters started attending high

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 309-315.

²¹ Jehuda Bauer, *Úvahy o holocaustu* (Praha: Academia, 2009), 173.

schools and some even made it into universities. Communication with non-Jewish women, friends and neighbors was intense and rich, though not without problems – as confirmed by biographical narratives. Gradually, between the years 1939-1945, anti-Jewish decrees of the Slovak government were being passed and these represented the end of any emancipation of women outside the family and community. These decrees affected all spheres of life and eventually ended up taking away human rights and lives of Jewish men and women in Slovakia.

Women's Biographical Narratives and the Holocaust

The onset of the fascist regime with its anti-Jewish propaganda and legislation had a fatal impact on the structured way of life of the Jewish community – those members who were closely connected with Judaism as well as those who have assimilated with the majority society.²² The narratives provide us with reflections of this period and of the ways individual actors lived through and survived the persecution of this era – such as loss of employment, ban on attending schools, end of friendships, and ban on freedom of movement. Also, via racial legislation, they also clearly show how the regime imposed a common identity, which forcefully united a previously heterogeneous group into a single unit labeled as the enemy of the Slovak nation.

The corpus of collected biographical narratives of women represents different types of experiences such as hiding, living in secrecy, assumed identity, on the escape, but also experiences

²² Many girls from Jewish families were engaged in scouting, which was, at the time, organized by young Zionists. And it were representatives of this group of young people who later became engaged in the anti-fascist resistance movement in Slovakia as well as in the resistance in concentration camps. Ironically, it were precisely young unmarried Jewish girls who were eventually the first ones to be deported to extermination camps on the territory of occupied Poland.

from labor camps located on Slovak territory, from living in the Slovak mountains during the Slovak National Uprising and, of course, from Nazi extermination camps. Reflections of life in labor camps located on the territory of the then Slovakia (Nováky, Sered' and Vyhne) feature prominently in these narratives.

Since the philosophy of labor camps was to demonstrate the usefulness and economic benefits of the concentrated Jews who worked in the camps, it was the women's labor that had sometimes directly led to delays in deporting entire families or to having a person crossed out from the deportation list:

It was the 12th of May, when we got to that place, to Nováky. Luckily mother was a trained seamstress, so she was right away assigned to the sewing workshop, because there were all sorts of workshops there. Father went to work in agriculture and because mother was a trained seamstress, and therefore really needed, we actually managed to get to the camp. Not into the collection camp, the concentration camp but to the labor camp. Well, so actually mother saved our lives and we actually spent two and a half years in that place, in Nováky. (Testimony no. 85, born 1935)²³

A similar point is visible in the following testimony:

The last deportation took place exactly on the day of the greatest Jewish holiday, on Yom Kippur. After the war, well not after the war, but twenty years after the war, I learned about something that was taking place at that very time from my sister. Something which had a lot to do with me. I did not know that I was also included in the deportation list, the Yom Kippur one. My sister was the head of a sewing workshop in Nováky where she sewed clothes also for the wife of the camp

²³ Excerpts of biographical narratives are taken from the archives of the Milan Šimečka Foundation, *Oral History: The Fate of Those Who Survived the Holocaust*. For reasons of personality and personal data protection of respondents, excerpts are marked with a registration number and the narrator's year of birth. The quoted paragraphs are word-to-word transcripts of recorded testimonies and they were not subjected to proofreading. The testimonies are originally in Slovak and their selected parts in my text are my translations. Each translation as well as the transcription in itself is for me a kind of interpretation.

commander, Mrs. Polhorová. And my sister learned that I was on the deportation list, so she went to Mrs. Polhorová and asked her to go and talk to Mr. Polhora (Nováky camp commander) and Mr. Polhora took me off of the list. It is only because of this that I am sitting here today. I had learned this from my sister only twenty years after the war because she did not want to tell me and I can understand why. Because instead of me, someone else had to go. (Testimony no. 71, born 1919)

Testimonies of women who were in the first deportation trains to Auschwitz provide us with unique insights and valuable reflections on the period, when the camp was only in the process of becoming the “factory of death” and they, themselves, were involved in building the side camp Birkenau. Being “old inmates” who were assigned low numbers gave them the opportunity to become familiar with the often incomprehensible and capricious “rules of operation” of the camp machinery. Descriptions of the entire process containing many nuances and particularities, which they had experienced as camp inmates, became a part of their life stories:

I went alone first because I was afraid, I wanted to hide and the wood tradesman also offered to put me into hiding somewhere, but my father said why would they take these children, I was ashamed for having such a fear of my own life, so I did not hide, I stayed home and I was the first one to be taken, the others were hiding, at least on that Saturday, because they knew that they were going to take us away, take us to the concentration camp. A fireman dressed up in a Hlinka Guard uniform, not the firefighters' uniform, but in the Hlinka Guard one, came to get me, they took me on 21 March 1942, this was the first day of spring.... (Testimony no. 7, born 1925)²⁴

Recollections of women being transported in the first deportation trains heading from Slovakia to Auschwitz reflect the diverse experiences of women who held different ranks and had different occupations throughout the camp's existence. They capture not only their own personal experience, but they also describe the

²⁴ The Hlinka Guard was the militia maintained by the Slovak People's Party in the period from 1938 to 1945.

structured community of camp prisoners and characterize it as a social organism made up of diverse relationships. In their biographies, the women speak about the inhumane conditions, which they were confronted with from the very first day. Descriptions of situations taking place in the camps are as if reflections of a morbid world, an antipole to the world we know. Ideals, norms, and values characterizing their lives until then, which they had acquired and looked up to – these were often a handicap in the camp world, a handicap, which had turned against them and even put them in danger. In the pre-war society, an ideal woman was neatly dressed up, took care of her appearance, and motherhood and childcare were of high social regard. As it quickly became apparent, this was not the case in the camp. Women with small children were immediately sentenced to death. Only some of them, who understood that having a child is a handicap, had to make the well-known “Sophie’s choice”: leave their children to their own fate, or follow them into the gas chambers. A similar fate also awaited all pregnant women. For women, motherhood became a life-threatening burden:

There were almost no children in the camp until the autumn of 1944, because, together with their mothers, all of them were gassed upon arrival. But pregnant women did arrive in the camp. And when the pregnant women gave birth, a day or two later, she was gassed with that kid. (Testimony no. 10, born 1915)

A strong theme, which reemerges in women’s biographical narratives is pregnancy in the camp conditions, pseudo-scientific experiments of the camp “doctors” on women, forced sterilization. This again only shows how biologically determined the fates of Jewish women during the Holocaust were. The narratives describe moments when nudity, a social taboo in those days, became a form of violent public humiliation. Women of all ages recall the camp “admission ceremony,” when suddenly they found themselves – mothers, daughters, children – all in one place naked in front of the eyes of strangers – men, who took away their last remaining illusions, clothes, personal property, appearance and name.

Women recollected their first moments in the camp when they arrived there in 1942.²⁵ The first quotation describes the process of “dewomanizing”:

The way they stripped us, shaved us, cut our hair, bathed us, how they say in Slovak, in the same tub all those four-five hundred people, everything imaginable was floating in the tub, it was so small that everyone noticed. The thing that I really remember is, when we came out of there with our hair cut, shaved, and in those uniforms taken from Russian soldiers, some spotted, others not, I saw lots of men standing by in the same uniforms, and those were our mothers. And our sisters. And we almost did not recognize each other. One cannot imagine what a woman looks like with a shaved head, so completely dewomanized, it was terrible, I almost did not recognize my own mother, only when she called on me. (Testimony no. 65, born 1913)

Upon arrival at the concentration camp, during the selection, the women were forced to go through a several-hour “ceremony” – standing naked in front of their male captors. Such situations represent dual discrimination: humiliation by forcing the prisoners to undress themselves and, on top of that, by having them stand naked in front of male guards – representing another form of sexual harassment.

It didn't matter whether it was January or February. All women were stripped naked and had to hand over their clothes, which were sent off for so-called disinfection. They were running around the camp and in front of the SS men naked all day, in winter and snow. But meanwhile, the selection was in process, right, and in the evening they got their clothes back, of course, not their original clothes, that could not have been, and they were always covered with lice. What a sight!? You

²⁵ I created these categories and used quotations from two different periods – in the year 1942 Jewish women from Slovakia became some of the very first prisoners of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. In contrast, those who arrived to this camp in 1944 were already rather well informed about what was going on in Nazi concentration camps.

know, when you saw all those naked women running around in the snow in front of the SS men, so on and so forth, it was a horror. (Testimony no. 10, born 1915)

The women with children came in 1944 to Auschwitz-Birkenau and had the possibility to stay together. The chosen quotation should show a slightly different experience as those from 1942 and the memory of a seven year old girl and her effort to protect her mother:

They put us into this barrack, a long low brick oven ran through the middle of the barrack and it had these plank beds. On one side they put the women with children and on the other they separated the men and 15-16-years-old boys, these were put together with the men. We were there for several days. When we went out, we saw all the men lined up....Then we went into the showers. Again, we stood in a hallway of some sort, they stripped us of everything we still had. These were still our own things. Adult women were shaved, they cut everyone's hair, even the children's. And, this again is one of the things I remember very clearly, that that little mother of mine, I wanted to protect her so much. I kept on pushing myself in front of her and I have this feeling till today, it's still very vivid. I was imagining how very ashamed she must have been. I will always have a fresh memory of this moment in me. When I think of it, I relive the situation over and over again.²⁶

Narratives of Jewish women from Slovakia confirm the findings of female historians dealing with the topic of women in the Holocaust that Jewish women, at that time, were in fact victimized twice – once as a woman and the second time as Jew. Their suffering in the ghettos, on the run, in the underground or camps was caused by the biological characteristics of the female body as well as by the social role of women. They experienced the loss of intimacy, their own identity, in harsh circumstances and without basic sanitary conditions. Included in the mass, tamped by fear over their loved ones' fates as well as their own, stressed out by

²⁶ Transcript of a testimony recorded via oral history method as a part of a joint project of the Holocaust Documentation Center and Hidden Child Slovakia, woman, born 1935.

daily uncertainty, tortured by pain, hunger and bullying – they were balancing between life and death.

Biographical narratives reflect the reality of such situations when the female narrators learned to distinguish, what is essential and what is not, they learned that even though they might be physically fragile and more vulnerable than men, they are able to withstand the harsh climate and living conditions. In women's testimonies we also find, between the lines of their descriptions of specific events, references to an atmosphere of camaraderie and to small groups of women helping each other in the camp barracks.

Women, as well men, construct their life stories through social relations. We learn about the hierarchy of male and female prisoners, about their means of communication, about the abuse of the imaginary power by senior female prisoners – *kapos*, on the one hand, and about sacrifice, support, and cohesion of “sisters with a common destiny,” on the other. One thing was certain: if any one of them remained alone and allowed to “lose themselves,” she would not have survived. The narratives mention, both implicitly as well as explicitly, that survival in the camps depended on cooperation, friendship, solidarity and support among women.

We also find descriptions of situations, when women, even under these restrictive conditions, took care of their own hygiene, cleanliness of their living space and clothing. After several years of continuous food-deprivation and constant feeling of hunger and frustration, they managed to distract themselves by talking about cooking, compiling ideas for menus and exchanging recipes of their favorite dishes, in order to create an illusion, which would replace food. This mutual cooperation and communication created a sense of usefulness and belonging that helped them survive. Nevertheless, relations between women – prisoners were varied, the same way they were in their previous lives.

One woman survivor recollected the behavior of a Polish *kapo*, who was political prisoner – antifascist, but at the same time she was strongly anti-Semitic:

Our *Blockälteste* was a Polish woman by the name of Stanislava Starostka, Starostková, we called her Stena. She was one particularly beautiful, but really very beautiful, stylish woman, but she was as cruel as she was pretty. Whenever she could, she would beat us up. And she was a political prisoner, not an antisocial or whatnot, a political prisoner, but, nevertheless, she hated the Jews. (Testimony no. 65, born 1913)²⁷

Another reflected the feelings of the helpless and the behavior of religious Jewish women in the camp:

We have experienced too much, when we were losing the really good friends and acquaintances, we were helpless. We could not help. For example, there was one girl from Trenčín among us, who was entirely phlegmatic to everything so I once had to slap her because she was not even willing to change her clothes or to wash, nothing. She managed to survive. But, at that time, she was so numb that I said to myself, I'll try it this way... And we had another experience of this kind from when we arrived in Ravensbrück, here we also had with us very religious women from Eastern Slovakia. They were absolutely not willing to touch anything, no food, not even the so-called black coffee, they did not want to drink that and they kept on cursing at us that God will punish us for drinking what the Germans gave us. They all died of starvation. And from that moment on, in fact, I do not believe in anything. (Testimony no. 91, born 1926)

The following testimony reflects how in the critical moment of selection a self-devotion effort resulted in making the witness part of a new family:

[W]e had a roll call during the night and we had to strip completely naked. And now, again, a German started the selection. And so when I was in Riga, I worked with Latvians. I worked with one mother who had three daughters. They were very nice to me, they saw that I was so young and that I was all alone, that I wasn't there with anyone else, they were so very polite. And when we were being selected by the German, he put the daughters on one side and the mother

²⁷ *Blockälteste* is the German equivalent of a kapo – head of a prisoners' block.

on the other.... And I, when he was finished with the selection, and I was ashamed, so I covered my breasts with my hands, because we were naked, we did not have our clothes on, and I stepped out of the row, approached him and said to him: Herr "Scharführer," and I told him in German, *Ich habe zu eine Bitte*. And he looks at me and asks me: *Und was für eine Bitte hast du?* and I tell him that, that I have one request: *Seien sie so gut und tauschen sie mich aus mit dieser Mutter*, I asked him if he would be so kind and swap me with the mother. And, in turn, he tells me in German, he, again, looks at me and says: And why do you want to swap places with the mother? And I tell him that there is no one left to cry for me and that the three girls over there are crying for their mother. And his jaws started clenching and then he said to me, while staring and staring at me, and then he says the following: No, he says, I will not swap you, but I will let the mother go to the other side. And so he returned the mother to these girls... The girls kissed me and even the mother kissed me and said: You know, you'll be my fourth daughter. (Testimony no. 33, born 1928)

Biographical narratives also capture situations when women became the victims of their own biological as well as their social and political status. This experience is often not explicitly included in the biographical narratives, we learn about them off the record, off camera, in confidential conversations with women, when they do not wish to be recorded. Myrna Goldenberg supports this claim when she says that the Anne Frank, who survived rape, did not put their stories into writing. She points out that in the harsh conditions of the camps and ghettos, women were forced by circumstances to use their own bodies as payment for food for themselves, children, relatives.²⁸ We learn about such situations and cases rather indirectly from the testimonies of women, who became eye-witnesses of sexual violence, prostitution.

²⁸ Myrna Goldenberg focuses her research on Jewish women, with emphasis on the era of the Holocaust; see Myrna Goldenberg, "Lessons Learned From Gentle Heroism: Women's Holocaust Narratives," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 548 (1996): 78-93.

Some of those *Funktionshäftlinge*, when they were well behaved they were given a voucher or vouchers for one hour for this or that woman, there in the *Puff*.²⁹ There were so many of them, I do not know how many there were, I cannot remember, but there were several, mainly Germans, Jews were not allowed to be there, that would be *Rassenschande*.... Once I went to the German block, we needed one of these women. So I went there shortly before the commandos came over in order to find one who would voluntarily go to the brothel. Well, one volunteered and the other one almost killed me because she was her girlfriend. They were, especially the Germans, imprisoned for some eight, nine, ten years already. So many had become lesbians, and thus it was difficult to talk to them. They were jealous of each other and that's no easy thing to deal with. (Testimony no. 65, born 1913)

The next recollection speaks about another possibility of a young woman's survival:

This woman E., who came to the camp with the first girls' deportation train and lived through the death of her siblings, mother, father, she probably became the lover of one of the SS man and he appointed her as the head wardress of, it was called "*Kleidungskammer*," i.e. over the place where they put all those things, which were taken from the prisoners when they arrived in persons deportation trains. And she said one thing, when we were walking along the Lagerstrasse and we could already hear the sounds of cannon shots, cannonade, she said that it's horrible, it is coming to an end, I will never be doing as well as I was here. That was something, something so absurd that can never forget it, that the concentration camp deformed people in all sorts of ways. (Testimony no. 11, born 1925)

Many women survivors have had similar experience during the liberation period, when these violent sexual acts were not committed by the Nazis and their collaborators, but by the soldiers – liberators. Although, women who were raped during the Holocaust only rarely spoke spontaneously about this experience, we are able to gather some information from testimonies, which describe their eyewitness account of what had happened to a third person:

²⁹ The term referring to the brothel in Auschwitz, also known as "the special building."

Following liberation we were...that Divna girl, who was an analphabet and I used to teach her to read and write in the camp a little bit...so, when the towns were empty both of us immediately started looking for all sorts of clothes ... so she put on a dirndl dress, typical for farmers, and suddenly out of nowhere: ten slant-eyed Russians came and raped her in the attic. (Testimony no. 7, born 1925)

A strong theme, which reemerges in women's biographical narratives is pregnancy in the camp conditions, pseudo-scientific experiments of the camp "doctors" on women, forced sterilization. This again only shows how biologically determined the fates of Jewish women during the Holocaust were.

Biographical narratives of women who have experienced the Holocaust usually not only capture the atmosphere of liberation and the decision to return home, but also the struggles of post-war life. Freedom, the act of liberation, awareness of regained freedom, reflection of feelings associated with the end of the war are represented in survivors' narratives in various forms. They capture feelings of happiness, relief, joy, euphoria, as well as disillusionment, pain, and the trauma of survival. A surprising moment keeps on reemerging in women's testimonies – it is a moment when they have realized that they did not feel anything during the actual act of liberation. The first moments of freedom were charged with ambivalent feelings of joy and concern about the immediate future. This was due to the fact that the women often did not know exactly where they were, where they were supposed to go, or where their closest relatives were.

One of the first signs of freedom was the possibility of relatively free movement, the need to obtain food and indulge in one's basic hygiene needs. Food, bath, clean clothes and good shoes – these were the women's first desires when they were set free. First moments of freedom and meeting the liberators, however, were not always characterized by relief and joy. This was not only due to the bad physical and often bad mental state of the prisoners, but also due to suffering from the soldiers' – liberators' physical violence. It was exactly these exhausted and sick women who became victims of sexual violence, which only led to exacerbating their trauma.

Women's testimonies also reflect the diverse experience of first meetings with the civilian population – both in Slovakia as well as abroad. In their biographies, the survivors often put themselves into sharp contrast with those, who have not experienced the Holocaust. Years spent in Nazi concentration camps had influenced the female prisoners' thinking, behavior, and actions. This experience had determined their relationship to tangible and personal property and also often loosened their perception of socially appropriate public behavior (loss of shyness of nudity, negligence about one's appearance). The general public failed to demonstrate its understanding for manifestations of such behavior and this only further complicated their mutual communication in the years to come.

The common denominator of post-war narratives is primarily the women's desire to forget the hardships and tragedies of the Holocaust, not to return to or mention these memories. The women, girls wanted to integrate into "normal life," they waited for relatives, parents and friends. In their minds, living a "normal" life meant picking up where they had been forced to leave off – return to school, complete their education, and find employment. Their primary desire was, however, family life. Young women got married and wanted to have children. Pregnancy and giving birth to a child, which for many of them was very difficult, symbolized somewhat of a victory over what they thought their fates were going to be:

So after the war, I thought the only thing that would have certainly helped me very much, although I was not the youngest anymore, I was way over thirty, would have been a child. That certainly would be a lot better. Just a remark, it was not very easy. I mean, us women, in terms of women's issues we were sick for quite a long time.... So, of course, getting pregnant in general was not such a simple thing. That's also a part of it.... After the year 1948 I was really extremely happy because I was too able to give birth to my daughter. (Testimony no. 5, born 1910)

The second quotation reflects how the Holocaust influenced also the post-war family life:

When we got married with my husband, there were so many things, so many diseases went around, in a short period of time I gave birth to three children, my first son in 1946 and in 1948 came the twins, and then I became very ill. I spent about a half a year in the hospital. The children stayed with our friends, because they were still little. So we could not emigrate because I was not allowed to be on the sun and my husband would not be able to feed a family of five on his own, it takes two people to do that. So we stayed here and the locals did us not harm. (Testimony no. 13, born 1925)

In pursuing their visions of postwar life, the women chose different strategies. Nevertheless, they were again being confronted with their identity (gender and their Jewish identity) as well as their experience during the Holocaust. Their efforts to live a normal and subtle life were complicated by the consequences of years-long persecution during the Holocaust. Medical, physical and psychological problems (infertility, complications during pregnancy, depression), consequences of living through a trauma, affected their post-war lives. After all, the Holocaust “caught up” with all of them.

Biographical narratives of women who have experienced the Holocaust do not only describe their own tragic fate, but also offer interpretations of their own attitudes and reactions to different situations, their self-presentation as an emotional human being, relationships and the will to overcome harsh situations without losing one's dignity. Until the female survivors' senior age, reflections of the Holocaust are not only present in their biographical narratives, but they are also a frequent topic of conversation with their peers who have had similar experience. The Holocaust has become a part of their identity and thus the basic (consciously or unconsciously used) measure of assessing different situations, the outside world, relationships, and experiences.

Content analysis of testimonies by Slovak women, who survived the Holocaust, showed that the themes they reflect and the way they construct them are comparable with the findings captured in foreign studies. It is important to say that in Slovakia, we are still in an early stage of gender-based analyses in the field of Holocaust

studies and there are many areas left to be explored. The very first analysis showed that also Slovak female testimonies contain gender-specific coping skills: formation of mutually-helpful surrogate families and “camp sister” relationships, sharing recipes and cooking techniques in an attempt to overcome hunger.³⁰ Women had strategies for keeping their bodies, hair and clothes clean; maintaining a human and even feminine appearance.³¹ Although in the Milan Šimečka Foundation Videoarchive there are only several testimonies touching upon this topic (many more memories remained off-the-record), the Jewish women were more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment and rape than men. As the analysis shows, the women’s destinies were intertwined with that of their children. Motherhood and starting their own family after the Holocaust was one of the most common wishes of female survivors.

Testimonies reflect gender information when narrators re/construct their relationships – when they discuss the women’s social interaction in the family environment and the local community. The women’s current interpretation of this experience as well as their life strategies following the Holocaust is as diverse as their experience during the Holocaust. They do, however, have a common view – perception of their own life history. They set their priorities, contextualize everyday experiences and reflect any social and political change through the prism of the Holocaust. Directly and indirectly, they transmit this approach to the next generations by educating their children and grandchildren. These second or third generations of Holocaust survivors in Slovakia have, however, not even begun to talk about their own life stories, which are also, inherently, linked to the Holocaust.

Trans. Daniela Richterová

³⁰ Myrna Goldenberg, “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 327-339.

³¹ Felicja Karay, “Women in the Forces-Labor Camps,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 285-309.

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“November Winds Destroyed My Happiness”: Gender, Ethnicity, and Geographical Displacement During and after the Shoah

MONIKA HANKOVÁ

November winds destroyed my happiness. Oh, everything is gone – my home, my husband and my parents. They intended to destroy the two of us as well!”¹ (K.P.)²

Presented case study analyses the fate of K.P., a female doctor of medicine born in Karlsbad from national and ethnic identity, geographical displacement, and gender perspective. Her life story during and after the war, including experiences of her family members, is covered in a separate study.³ It illustrates the suffering

¹ “Novemberwind zerbrach mein Glück, och alles liegt im Scherben, Heim, Gatte, Eltern – alles fort. Sie wollten auch uns zwei verderben!” From the poem “Zum 9. November 1950/1938.” Archiv Židovského muzea v Praze (Archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague, further: A ŽMP), K.P. – materials (further: Estate K.P.), K.P.’s diary.

² The names were shortened upon request of the family.

³ Monika Hanková, “Klara Fischer-Pollak (1899–1970): (Po)válečné osudy židovské lékařky z Karlových Varů,” in *Židé v Čechách 2: Sborník ze semináře konaného v září 2008 v Nýrsku*, eds. Vlastimila Hamáčková, Monika Hanková and Markéta Lhotová (Praha: Jewish Museum in Prague, 2009), 50–70. This study is based primarily on the archival documents, such as correspondence, K.P.’s diary and other biographical papers preserved as a part of K.P. Estate in A ŽMP.

of Jews from so called mixed families after the annexation of the Sudeten Lands, it reflects all the reversals of immediate post-war period and years that followed and sheds more light on the experience of multiple geographical displacement. In short, her story helps unravel the exceedingly sensitive and complex issue within contemporary historiography of Czech-German relations after 1945.⁴ Nevertheless, it is above all a story of woman torn away from her everyday life, forced to struggle for living and bring up her child under extremely difficult circumstances. Hence, the gender perspective adds a new crucial coordinate to think about the abovementioned complex of German Jews of the Sudeten Lands thematics.

National Belonging in Conflict

Before we begin the story of the war and post-war experience of this woman, some basic facts should be mentioned: K.P. had a German-Jewish background. She was born in a small village in the Karlsbad region of Czechoslovakia, married a civil engineer, who was not Jewish. The couple moved to Karlsbad, where their son was born in 1932. According to the statutory interpretation of Anti-Jewish Acts, their marriage was defined as a privileged mixed marriage.⁵

⁴ The question of the so-called “German Jews” after 1945 (the term “Sudeten-German Jew” is as a rule not used) is a little-mapped area within post-war history, standing so often outside of the interests of the broader research community. Of the scant literature on this theme, we can name at least Reuven Assor, “‘Deutsche Juden’ in der Tschechoslowakei 1945–1948,” *Sudetenland* 35, no. 2 (1993): 161–165.

⁵ See: Raul Hilberg, *Pachatelé, oběti, diváci: Židovská katastrofa 1933–1945* (Praha: Argo, 2002), 125. Closer to the topic see: Beate Meyer, “Jüdische Mischlinge”: *Rassenpolitik und Verfolgungserfahrung 1933–1945* (Hamburg: Stiftung Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, 1999). The distinction between “privileged” and “non-privileged” was decided by Hitler himself in December 1938, though the categories were not legally fixed. See: Bundesarchiv Berlin (zur Zeit der Akteneinsicht Abteilung Potsdam), Reichsministerium des Innern (RMdI), 343–345,

Although their status brought them certain benefits (e.g. they were not obliged to wear the Star of David), some anti-Jewish regulations applied to them as well. Like many others, their son was banned from attending school according to Nuremberg Laws. As we learn from K.P.'s official correspondence after 1945, father of the family was repeatedly persuaded to divorce his wife, but he refused and was later dismissed from work. Stressful circumstances, fear of upcoming events, and a failed immigration attempt led to their decision to commit suicide in November 1938.⁶ However, the suicide attempt failed. The family was found in time and rescued, but their act was classified as a serious offence resulting in brutal interrogation and imprisonment. Having been incarcerated for four weeks, they decided to leave Sudetenland and followed their plan soon after they were released. At first it was not clear where they would leave for, but after a short stay in Berlin they decided in Stettin. The husband of K.P. fortunately found a job, but later he was forced to labour for the Todt organization, just like many other people from mixed marriages.⁷ He was sent East, to Belarussia. K.P. and her son remained in Stettin, struggling along in miserable conditions. K.P.'s husband, in response to an exhausting disease, depressive mental state, and permanent fear of being discovered as person who lived in a mixed marriage, committed suicide in 1944. His death – apart from emotional turmoil – had serious consequences for K.P. and her son. It brought about the eventuality of further persecution and, more worryingly, real danger of being transported to a concentration camp. They had to leave

Geheimer Schnellbrief des Ministerpräsidenten Generalfeldmarschall Göring, Beauftragter für Vierjahresplan, an den RMdI u. a. v. 28. 12. 1938, quoted in Meyer, “*Jüdische Mischlinge*,” 30, 389, footnote 56.

⁶ See: Confirmation of the District Court, Karlsbad (Bezirksgericht in Karlsbad), 25. 3. 1946, Estate K.P., A ŽMP.

⁷ The Todt organization was named after its founder Fritz Todt, *Reichsminister* for weapons and ammunition. The organization built military installations and infrastructure throughout Europe. Concentration camp prisoners, prisoners of war, and other prisoners comprised part of their work force.

Stettin, fearing for their safety as the city suffered continuous raid bombing. Finally, they found shelter at K.P.'s mother-in-law in Karlsbad, where they were hidden till the end of war. After the war K.P. was to be resettled from Czechoslovakia, because in the 1930 census she had declared German nationality.⁸ Her resettlement was eventually dismissed with regards to her medical profession, which was considered a vocation of public interest. Nevertheless, she lost her position as senior consultant in the municipal hospital in Karlsbad, and as a Czech German she found herself in trouble. She had to bear the animosity from the re-established state, which did not count her among citizens with full rights. Though she met conditions for the restitution of her property (during the war she suffered from Nazi terror and she was a holder of the antifascist card), it was never restored to her.

As she described herself, her "insufficient" existence in the new state and loss of her relatives in concentration camps, including both parents and three sisters, deeply affected her ability to adjust to changed conditions. The fierce anti-German campaign between the years of 1945-1948 had also bred general animosity against "anything German." Finding it impossible to live and perform her profession the way she used to, in 1946 she decided to emigrate with her son to Bavaria, Germany.

K.P.'s first impressions of her new home were not pleasant for various reasons. The attitude of fellow citizens towards newcomers was not quite friendly and soon she found out that becoming a part of local society would be rather difficult.⁹ At this point, K.P.'s

⁸ Before the issue of corresponding Acts, which restricted resettling so called "German Jews." (It was the Decree of the Ministry of Inferior Affairs, which strictly banned resettling of Jews who declared German nationality in 1930. The Decree was issued on Sept. 10, 1946).

⁹ The German people who were persecuted during the war, often felt that they were not welcomed and were seen as intruders. It was even more true for the newcomers. Things went so far in some cases that if anyone said he had been a political prisoner or had returned from a concentration camp, he was almost branded a criminal – so anti-Semitism saw the sun again. See also Ursula Büttner, *Not nach der Befreiung: Die Situation der*

health was rapidly declining, and this unpleasant fact eventually forced her to resign her medical practice. Her son (R.P.) originally intended to study medicine, but due to an unfortunate financial situation and the fragile health of his mother he enrolled in the Film and Journalism Institute (Institut für Bildjournalismus) in Munich. In 1953, he completed the course and soon after started to work as a camera operator. He was then able to support his mother and he lived with her until her death in 1970. This is, in short, the story of K.P.

National and Ethnic Identities

It should be pointed out that the crucial premise presented for this topic is the way K.P. observed her situation in particular periods of her life. This aspect is closely related to the identity issue. As a theoretical category, the identity of an individual represents a complicated combination of many factors, such as bio-genetic, ethnic, religious, cultural and others. Jewish identity as a minority identity can be classified as one of "a group deprived of political power, psychologically handicapped, forced to react to attitudes and the behaviour of a majority."¹⁰ Let me stress in this context that there exists a distinct difference between handed down or transmitted identity and one's active self-anchoring in a given society. Various forms of identity and the way it can change over time largely depend on the ability of the individual to adapt in a changing environment. A plurality of identities and self-understanding also depends to a great extent on the acceptance of the surrounding

deutschen Juden in der britischen Besatzungszone 1945 bis 1948 (Hamburg: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1985), 27. The lack of houses in the first place and the lack of means in general were particularly difficult. K.P. officially tried to get her claims for support as a Holocaust victim.

¹⁰ Blanka Soukupová, "Identita židovské minority po tzv: Sametové revoluci (1989–1992) na základě veřejných menšinových projevů," in *Národnostní menšiny na přelomu tisíciletí*, ed. Ol'ga Šrajeroová (Opava: Slezské zemské muzeum, Slezský ústav, Opava a Dokumentační a informační středisko Rady Evropy při EIS UK, Praha, 2002), 152.

society and on the particular time and space circumstances of the individual. A psychologist would further remark that one's unique personality should be considered as well.¹¹

Regarding K.P., we can assume that her German heritage was the basic element of her identity in the prewar period; after all, she had declared German nationality in the population census in 1930. The matter of our interest is: which factors precisely caused the shift of her identification with German nation? In this context, as I believe, the following events can be considered crucial. On the social level, it was the introduction of the so called Nuremberg Laws, the escalating range of anti-Jewish regulations and Kristallnacht; on a personal level persecution, imprisonment, and the necessity to flee from the reach of the Gestapo to Stettin.

As Eleonóra Hamar points out, in reference to conclusions of Lynn Rapaport published in her monograph *Jews in Germany after the Holocaust*, the Holocaust has been reflected in the everyday life of Jews in Germany in the form of binary opposites – the German as offender and Jew as victim.¹² This view posed Jews and Germans as two totally conflicting categories. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind the fact that Germans Jews often show various forms of identity, though in general we can rather speak of the experience of exclusion (in the context of German society).¹³

At this point it is important to stress that K.P. was a Czech German; she was born in Bohemia, where she grew up and stepped into her adult life. Her Czech was not perfect, though she spoke it

¹¹ Kateřina Čapková, "Češství, němectví a židovství z pohledu Židovky z Javorné/Seewiesen," in *Identita versus integrita: Spolužití Čechů, Němců a Židů (nejen) v oblasti Šumavy a Českého lesa: Příspěvky z mezinárodní konference 25.–26. dubna 2007 v Hartmanicích u Sušice*, ed. Iveta Coufalová (Plzeň: Grafia, 2007), 89 and 92.

¹² Lynn Rapaport, *Jews in Germany after the Holocaust: Memory, Identity, and Jewish-German Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Eleonóra Hamar, Review of *Jews in Germany after the Holocaust: Memory, Identity, and Jewish-German Relations* by Lynn Rapaport, *Sociální studia* 5 (2000): 246–248.

¹³ Ibid., 247.

in her medical practice. However, Czechoslovakia was her home and she was closely attached to the country despite the fact she had declared German nationality. On one of her visits to Prague during the Nazi occupation she felt the city was foreign to her and “far too German,” though she used to feel comfortable in it before the war.¹⁴

Regarding her Jewish identity, according to available sources she was forced into “that feeling” (of being a Jewess) by circumstances, by people who perceived her as such. In her particular case, we can not trace any stronger attachment to Judaism. K.P.’s family background was fully secularized. Her family attended synagogue on Jewish High Holy Days only. K.P. herself left Jewish community in 1921. Like so many others she did not experience her Jewish identity, or more precisely its burden, until the German occupation. It should be mentioned that her husband was a Roman-Catholic, and at one point he had been considering leaving the church as well. Their son was baptized in a Roman Catholic parish church.

What was the fundamental element of K.P.’s identity immediately after the war? After she returned back to liberated Czechoslovakia, she undoubtedly tried hard to suppress the German part of her identity because of general ill feelings towards anything German.¹⁵ She could hardly identify herself with Germans only,

¹⁴ “I feel like a stranger in Prague. Prague is too German, I’m familiar with Czech language. It’s such a paradox.”; “Es (i.e. Prague, remark. M.H.) ist fremd, zu deutsch für mich, die ich der tschechischen Sprache wie Freund geworden [sic]– wie paradox.” A ŽMP, Inheritance K.P., K.P.’s journal.

¹⁵ German as a language of communication was no longer in use, schools teaching German were gradually closed down and German language itself became “the language of the enemy.” In this atmosphere most of German inscriptions were removed, including German inscriptions on gravestones. See closer: Heinrich Kuhn, “Das Ende der deutschen Sprache in der Tschechoslowakei: Von der Muttersprache im Schulunterricht zur Fremdsprache,” *Zwischen uns sei Wahrheit: Ausgewählte Schriften* (München: Sudetennd deutsches Archiv, 1992), 329–343.

after so many of them had openly or secretly sympathized with the Nazis. It should be highlighted that while she could have felt being a German inwardly, she could not have felt solidarity with the Germans as a nation, because they had caused so much misery in her life. K.P.'s post-war testimonials to various people reflect the fact that she never generalized; she distinguished between people.¹⁶ This attitude helped her when she emigrated to Bavaria. She was able to settle there and start a new life in post-war Germany, though she was – as documents prove – firmly attached to her native country.¹⁷ In Bavaria, she was surely taken for a foreigner, rootless, strange and a bit peculiar – after all, she was a Sudeten German and on the top of it – a Jewess. We should also consider the fact she had to live within a society that had largely, though secretly, sympathized with the former Nazi ideology. Now the question stands: how did she feel about it? Human attitudes do not change automatically when a regime collapses; anti-Semitism remained deeply rooted in people's minds. Was she successful in her efforts to integrate into the Bavarian environment? This question is far too complicated to be fully answered here. Adaptation strategies in post-war life often differ from case to case. K.P. undoubtedly chose to live a rather isolated life, though she must have been treated with respect due to her profession. Medical practice with its natural social contact undoubtedly had helped her in the integration process.

As for K.P.'s religious affiliations, in post-war questionnaires (e.g. Report at the Population Register from September 3, 1946) she states "believer" ("gottgläubig"), but on the contrary, she declared herself non-denominational ("konfessionslos") in the Counter Intelligence Corps United States Army data from the same time.¹⁸ From that

¹⁶ We speak of written testimonies that K.P. wrote for individuals of German nationality who had turned to her for help. Testimonies were to prove their antifascist standpoint.

¹⁷ A ŽMP, Inheritance K.P., K.P.'s diary.

¹⁸ Originally, "gottgläubig" was stated as well, but crossed out, (September, 8, 1946) A ŽMP, Inheritance K.P.

point on she consistently stated “non-denominational” in questionnaires of that kind. It may prove the plurality and variability of her attitude to religion. This matter can be related to the fact K.P. started to perceive herself differently in changed conditions, but it could also be a strategy.¹⁹

At first glance, the historical and social context seems to be of supreme importance here. Suffering experienced in war times resulted in many cases in the total loss of religious faith. In my opinion, the reason why K.P. originally stated she was a believer, but rewrote it and stated she was “non-denominational,” seems to be a result of a quick decision, reflecting her current state of mind at that time. In her particular case it is closely connected with her personal identification. K.P. stood in many ways outside the usual categories of her time. During the war she was protected by her marriage and did not share the tragic fate of her family members.²⁰ Although she was German, she could not identify with the family of her husband either.²¹ We cannot therefore interpret her decision to state that she was “non-denominational” in the questionnaire simply as a response to her war experience. It is no doubt a more complex issue.²²

¹⁹ See: Cynthia Crane, *Divided Lives: The Untold Stories of Jewish-Christian Women in Nazi Germany* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

²⁰ K.P. went to Prague a few times to visit her parents. She describes in her diary how she felt, when she could not go with them side by side on the pavement or travel by tram. They wore the Star of David, she did not. See K.P.'s diary.

²¹ For example, K.P.'s mother-in-law praised God in her daily prayer for saving Hitler after the unsuccessful assassination attempt. K.P. was forced to be present every time her mother-in-law prayed. See: K.P.'s memoir.

²² See: Jeanette Toussaint, “‘Wo war Gott?’ Die Auseinandersetzung von Überlebenden des Holocaust mit ihrem Glauben,” in *Ich bin die Stimme der Sechs Millionen. Das Videoarchiv im Ort des Information*, ed. Daniel Baranowski (Berlin: Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas, 2009), 150–158.

Geographical Displacement

K.P.'s life story can further be placed in the broader context of displacement and migration or emigration. Her particular case serves as an example of multiple displacements: first she was forced to leave Karlsbad for Berlin, and soon leaving Berlin again, because the family were not able to find a living there. Berlin was followed by the Stettin misery, then there were several stays in Prague, a return to Karlsbad at the end of the war and in the end, a more or less forced emigration to Germany after the war. In the context of her situation we can undoubtedly speak of the so called "rootlessness phenomenon."²³ She was a subject to continuous persecution and the forced emigration inadvertently influenced the process of forming her personal identity. As observed by Marcel Tomášek in his study (with reference to Vamik Volkan's and Norman Itzkowitz's conclusions): in spite of the fact that "a group does not choose the feeling of victimization, losses, and degradation are transformed into narrations which are bound to a particular cultural background, which thus becomes part of their very social identity."²⁴ We can conclude that although different groups of fellow citizens lived through the war and post-war years in different ways, they shared similar war-inflicted fates, so they often felt closer to members of other nationality groups than to members of their original community.²⁵

²³ Christiane Hartig, "Conversations about Taking Our Own Lives – Oh, a Poor Expression for a Forced Deed in Hopeless Circumstances! Suicide among German Jews 1933-1943," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 52, no. 1 (2007): 255.

²⁴ Marcel Tomášek. "Paradox vymístění: příspěvek k posttotalitní reflexi vztahů se sudetskými Němci a polsko-židovských vztahů," *Sociální studia* 2 (2004): 145; see also: Vamik D. Volkan and Norman Itzkowitz, "Modern Greek and Turkish Identities and Psychodynamics of Greek-Turkish Relations," in *Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 227-247.

²⁵ Eva Hahnová, *Sudetoněmecký problém – obtížné loučení s minulostí* (Ústí nad Labem: Albis, 1999), 211–212.

Considering the abovementioned facts, the most important question occurs: which social group did K.P. belong to after the war? She must have felt that her war experience differed from the “classical Holocaust experience” of a Protectorate Jew. At one end of the line, there were the experiences of those who first passed through Terezín ghetto, and then were interned in concentration camps in occupied Poland or Germany; at the other end, the experiences of an ordinary German. K.P. and her son did not belong to either.

The family’s life experience opens the topic of the suffering of Jews who were not interned in concentration camps.²⁶ Their distress could have been belittled after the war by simple comparison. The Holocaust survivors strictly distinguished among themselves; Auschwitz became the endmost boundary, which could not be compared to anything else.²⁷ Simply put, those who had passed through Auschwitz, gained the imaginary ticket to “the elite club” of survivors. As is obvious from above, K.P. stood quite low on that imaginary suffering scale. As a person who was not imprisoned in a concentration camp, and in addition was an Aryan German’s wife, she could have been taken as an inferior victim. But she suffered immense distress: a pogrom, constant fear, brutal interrogation, imprisonment by the Gestapo which, although short, affected her health a great deal, a suicide attempt, the necessity

²⁶ Another example of a female Jew from mixed marriage that was not interned in a concentration camp is Ernesta V. from Wiesbaden. She was protected by her Aryan husband, but her marriage ended in 1939. She was left alone with a young son in care. She was repeatedly and very brutally bullied by the Gestapo. She feared she would not be able to take care of her son, so she gave him away. She survived the war with broken health, one of her breasts had to be taken as a result of severe beating. She suffered from being separated from her child. See: James F. Tent, *Im Schatten des Holocaust: Schicksale deutsch-jüdischer Mischlinge im Dritten Reich* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2007), 117–118.

²⁷ Hilberg, *Pachatelé, oběti, diváci*, 171. The term “A Jew who survived” was not clearly defined in post-war period. It does not even have clear boundaries, but there exists a strict scale among those who survived; the crucial criterion being the measure of risk and the amount of suffering.

to flee from the country; and later on: her husband's suicide, loss of her family members in concentration camps, animosity in post-war Czechoslovakia, and last not least, her emigration to Bavaria.

Gender Perspective

K.P.'s post-war fate seen through the prism of gender reveals that she was first and foremost a widow and the mother of a young son, who lost her beloved husband in the war and remained alone with her little one. I would therefore define the aggravating circumstances of her difficult fate as one of the main factors crucial for the gender schema.

A viable and valuable source for uncovering K.P.'s post-war daily life and her woman's fate is the diary that she kept from the fifties through the sixties. Its analysis can provide us with an interesting perspective and answer a number of questions – how did she choose her strategy for proceeding, what was important to her, how did she reflect her wartime experience, etc.? From a formal perspective, K.P.'s diary reveals that she wrote poetry. Her poetry is an inextricable part of the diary. She wrote it directly in between her other reminiscences, and it is clear that she had a great deal of musical and poetic talent. Poems reflect her painful memories, her longing for a real home and domestic happiness, and also her lack of money. She wrote her poetry from the perspective of a female physician. The medical profession played an exceptionally important role in her life. She was always ready to help. This was true for her before the war and did not change at all in the post-war period. K.P.'s diary logs constitute a strong human testimony, wherein we can clearly see her specific female expectations, priorities, and perceptions: "I've found a little Dogma for myself. I live according to it, now. I want to be both, a human being and a doctor. I'm proud of the risible words of my patients: Our doctor is like a mother."²⁸ Her profession provided

²⁸ "Ich habe mir ein ganz kleines 'Dogma' gesucht und danach lebe ich nun: ich will Mensch und Arzt sein. Mein Stolz sind die lächerlichen

her a refuge, even though she was aware that in some way it had failed her.²⁹ Despite her difficult situation, she found it important not to lose her sense of humor.³⁰

The entire diary is addressed to her son who was her closest ally. It shows her relationship to him as exceptionally strong. We can also track that she was strongly professionally-oriented. But again and again, always afresh, the disrupted union with her husband and forced end of their relationship winds through her memories like a red thread. The tragic fate of her marriage forms a distinct dividing line in her life, the absolute foundation and basis for further anguish that lasted till the end of her days. K.P.'s bad state of health posed a great limitation on her. She suffered primarily from a disease of the peripheral nervous system, which is often reflected in her logs: "Life itself is the cause of my illness."³¹ In addition, she suffered from psychological afflictions and loneliness.

In her memories she continually returns to the thirties, particularly to the first half of that decade, the period when she still had a placid life and strong health. The question in this case must be whether women anchor themselves in the past more than their male counterparts do.³² Was it harder for individuals who had a happy family life before the war that war destroyed any chance of a new relationship? How could it have been possible to make a clean break from the past with a small son, i.e. – tangible evidence of a happy and lost world. K.P. never entered a new relationship,

Worte meiner Patienten: 'Unsere Doktorin ist wie eine Mutter.' A ŽMP, Inheritance K.P., K.P.'s diary.

²⁹ "My own profession left me alone." ("Mein eigenes Fach lässt mich im Stich"). Ibid.

³⁰ "One must have a sense of humour, it keeps you healthy." ("Humor muss man haben, dann bleibt man gesund"), from the poem "Lob des Alters," 4. dubna 1962. A ŽMP, Estate K.P., K.P.'s diary.

³¹ "Mich hat das Leben krank gemacht." Ibid.

³² It is known that after the war many women spent time remembering so-called better times. See: Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Women in the Aftermath of November 1938* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1996), 22.

her son shared the household with her and took care of her until her death. Living in memories, returning to a period she naturally must have idealized, as in similar cases, gave her mind refuge. The degree of idealization was significantly high in these instances. Despite the fact that life during the First Czechoslovak Republic was not nearly as idyllic as many portrayed it, there was something incomparable about it, seen by some as something almost mystical. Post-war times are thus sometimes viewed through the prism of the interwar experience, which can lead to a certain shift in evaluative judgements.³³ What certainly made a difference was the kind of reception individuals got from people. It is known that post-war confrontation with enmity or even just lack of empathy often led to resignation and inactive life. Such individuals did not even try to change their situation. In this context we can speak of specific withdrawal from the world. Even though they eventually adapted to new conditions, past negative experiences left them inefably affected.³⁴

K.P.'s life story can be compared to fate of another Jewish female doctor of medicine, Markéta Ungerová from Katovice, who was a sad victim of the post-war administration. She could not bare her changed post-war status and committed suicide in May 1947.³⁵ Doctor Ungerová worked during the war as a resistance movement member in a Czechoslovakian hospital in Great Britain. In May 1945, she went as a voluntary doctor to Terezín to fight the typhoid infection. After she returned to Prague she could not continue performing her profession, because she did not have all the necessary documents for attaining Czechoslovakian citizenship. The authorities refused her application, stating that just as her parents, she was a German of Jewish confession, she had

³³ Monika Hanková, "Léta obnovy a zklamaných nadějí. Zkušenosti židovské komunity v Čechách a na Moravě," *Historický obzor* 17, no. 9/10 (2006): 224.

³⁴ Ibid., 222.

³⁵ A brief report of her case was published in: *Věstník židovské obce náboženské* 9, no. 9 (1947), 121–122.

studied medicine in Prague at German university and there was no evidence she had any kind of affiliation to Czech nation.³⁶

There is no doubt a distinct difference between the two women. K.P., though she lost most of her family members including her husband, fought to provide a decent existence and new beginning for her son. I am convinced it was the main reason she lived on. Motivation is a crucial factor that determined the post-war adaptation of survivors. As well as age, we take as an important criterion, whether the individual survived alone, or whether he reunited with his partner, child, parents or other family members.³⁷

The son of K.P.

“After the nightmare had vanished in 1945, I didn’t understand why my mother was so unhappy – I thought we had been really lucky to manage to survive.”³⁸ R.P. was a boy of thirteen at freedom’s door; he was a premature child, who lost his father and had to cope with the fact. R.P. was just a small boy during the Nazi occupation, so he had not much opportunity to get close to his father. He says about his loss: “At that time my father’s and family’s absence meant more to me than I can imagine today or would ever know.”³⁹

Life for K.P. finished in 1945, but for her son it meant a new beginning. Despite the loss of his father and practically the entire family on his mother’s side, he welcomed the new world with anticipation and hope: he could start attending school again, make

³⁶ Ibid., 121. Quoted in: Šárka Nepalová, “Židovská menšina v Čechách a na Moravě v letech 1945–1948,” in *Terezínské studie a dokumenty*, eds. Miroslav Kárný and Eva Lorencova (Praha: Academia, 1999), 328.

³⁷ Monika Hanková, “Klara Fischer-Pollak (1899–1970).”

³⁸ “Als 1945 der Alptraum vorüber war, verstand ich nicht, warum meine Mutter so wenig froh war – ich empfand es als grosses Glück, überlebt zu haben.” R.P.’s memoirs, 8.

³⁹ “Für mich bedeutete das Fehlen des Vaters und der Familie mehr, als ich mir heute vorstellen kann und als ich mir je denken konnte.” R.P.’s memoirs, 9, see also interview with R.P., August 31, 2009.

friends and live the ordinary life of a teenage boy. K.P. survived with poor health, lost her family and beloved husband and, later, even her home country. Their life experience bound mother and son closely to each other. War and post-war experiences also led them to a very careful choice of friends. They did not make many friends, but if they did, the friendships were firm and lasted many years. R.P.'s fiancée, later his wife, with whom K.P. had a strong emotional, even sisterly relationship, spent a lot of time with them.

R.P.'s war experience and his life in his new home prove the initial hypothesis that the Holocaust experienced the way K.P.'s family did, seen from a child's point of view, was perceived as sort of adventure (e.g., forced flight, permanent moves, hiding, lack of money, etc.). R.P. pointed out that he had never starved during the war (although he fell seriously ill from insufficient nutrition in 1940). He says about the forced flees: "(I thought) that a journey around the world awaits us, which was really positive in my opinion." Then he adds: "For me it was more adventure than fear.... There had always been fun in the background."⁴⁰ It does not alter the fact that he lost his father, lost four years of education, and was in a bad state of health after the war. The psychological effects of deprivation appeared much later. All of the above experiences were fatal for the mother. First of all, she feared about her child's life throughout the war, she was left alone afterwards and she was worried that she would not be able to take care of her son if her fragile health got worse.

The story of K.P. is the story of a brave woman, a story of personal courage, a story full of inversions. Being a subject of multiple displacement, but standing outside the common categories of people with war experience, the return to pre-war identity was not possible in her case. The tragic fate of her marriage

⁴⁰ "(Ich dachte), wir haben eine Weltreise vor und es wird sehr interessant werden. Von mir ausgesehen, war es ganz ganz positiv... Es war mehr Abenteuer als Angst... Für mich gab es immer Spass im Hintergrund." Interview with R.P., August 31, 2009.

and experienced distress resulted in her leading an isolated life. Deprived of her native country and unable to integrate, she lived only for the sake of her son. It was her role as a mother that mostly determined her identity and formed her actions before, during, and after the war. As a female medical doctor, she performed her profession with a motherly touch.

There is no doubt that there are many stories similar to K.P.'s. Sadly, even though displacement, migration, and the post-war fates of German Jews has received some attention in the scholarly community in recent years, research focused on Jewish women from mixed marriages born in the former Sudetenland to my knowledge still stands aside, which leaves us with a lack of comparable examples. It is partly caused by the fact that before 1989 the topic was taboo. If mentioned at all, it was distorted by a strong ideological prism. In this context, I would stress not only the need for more case studies of Jewish women born in the former Sudetenland area, but also of comparative case studies that would clearly show the contours of war and post-war experience of Jewish women from different German language areas. As I believe, oral history and sources of personal nature can help us unravel such complex themes.

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Intersection of Erasures in Hungarian Art History: Erzsébet Schaár

HEDVIG TURAI

The memory of the Holocaust and how it is remembered is inextricably part of the history of the Holocaust. During the Kádár era in Hungary, both Jewish identification and anti-Semitism were not talked about, and with them, consequently, the historical investigation and memorialization of the Holocaust was severely limited as well. Whenever WWII was discussed, Jews were not mentioned, only “victims of fascism.” A good example of this was the exhibitions in the Hungarian block in Auschwitz 1 before 1989: Jews had been, as it were, “expelled” from the exhibition.¹ The Holocaust was one among other socialist-era taboos in art and other public culture, including the presence of the Soviet army in Hungary, a positive evaluation of 1956 revolution, the “Jewish question,” Trianon, pornography, etc.² There was a mutual, comfortable, silent agreement not to talk about anything that was bothering the present. This silent amnesia pact was the tacit underpinning of the regime.³ The Holocaust, accordingly, was erased from public discourse.

Parallel to this legacy of the pre-socialist “Jewish question,” the so-called “woman question” was declared to be resolved, as

¹ István Rév, “Zsidók kiűzetése,” *Enigma* 9, no. 42 (2004): 33-39.

² László Beke, “Magyar művészet a hatvanas években,” in *Hatvanas évek Magyarországon*, ed. Rainer M. János (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2004), 450-451.

³ Péter György, *Apám helyett* (Magvető: Budapest, 2011).

it had been appropriated by the socialist state, allegedly dealt with in a definitive fashion, and thus rendered irrelevant to the socialist present. Many women agreed with this latter view. The issues of femininity and feminist views were rejected not only by those artists who accepted the official socialist canon but also those who were outsiders to it. The heritage of the avant-garde was carried on by predominantly male artists, and those female artists who were part of the neo-avant-garde in the 1960s and 1970s rejected being considered women artists, as this category entailed a degrading qualification and marginalization of their art. Also, these female artists joined forces with men against the common enemy, the official socialist art of the regime. They believed in the true universal nature of art. Women's subject position thus remains largely hidden, both by themselves and subsequently by their interpreters. The Holocaust and feminism were thus erased, and especially in the special case of female artists whose personal life and experiences are connected to the persecution of Jews in Hungary. The two erasures intersected with each other.

I would like to make it clear in what sense I use the two terms, "intersection" and "erasure." The issue of intersectionality – "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" – has recently become an important contribution to feminist theory, as discussed by Leslie McCall.⁴ As she states, "[f]eminist researchers have been acutely aware of the limitations of gender as a single analytical category."⁵ Intersectionality can be defined, for instance after Patricia Hill Collins, as "interlocking dimensions of oppression."⁶ In this writing I would like to use this notion in an expanded sense:

⁴ Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771-1800.

⁵ McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," 1171.

⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221.

intersectionality as reflecting the problems within and outside of women's studies.⁷ I examine the intersectionality of gender, Jewishness, and location within the Central European historical and geopolitical space (fascism, socialism, post-socialism) to understand how it inflects the work of women artists. I use the notion of "erasure" as a removal of explicit representations, but still retaining of a trace of what has been removed. This trace becomes the object of interpretation.

A few feminist art historians have done research on the intersection of gender issues with Holocaust memory; however, they did not consider East-Central European art.⁸ As Muriel Blaive states, in Central Europe "the memory of the Shoah has been the opposite of what it represents in France or Germany. It was long seen as an anti-universal and therefore unjust vision, in which the Jewish population was attributed a special exclusivity to all misfortune and where other...victims of Nazism or communism would be morally forbidden about their own tragedy."⁹ In Hungary, in accordance with this general outlook, there were not too many artists in the Kádár era who openly dealt with the memory of the Holocaust. Works made for official commissions emphasized antifascist, humanist, universal values, and were generally allegorical, metaphorical, and figurative works. The victims of Nazism and the Holocaust were, by and large, presented as generically, "universally" human: without ethnic or gender specificity,

⁷ McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," 1772.

⁸ Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2003); Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁹ Her example of "other victims" is Polish, but it is equally true for Hungary, see: Muriel Blaive, "The Memory of the Holocaust and of Communist Repression in a Comparative Perspective: The Cases of Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia/The Czech Republic," in *Clashes of European Memory: The Case of Communist Repression and the Holocaust*, eds. Muriel Blaive, Christian Gerbel and Thomas Lindenberger (Innsbruck, Wien, Bozen: Studien Verlag: 2011), 158.

hence subsumable into the great human struggle against war and fascism in favor of peace and socialism. In Hungary, accordingly, Holocaust and gender issues in art have just begun to be discussed as single topics, but almost not at all in their overlapping, “intersectional” complexity.

When preparing the present chapter, the greatest methodological difficulty was posed by having to talk about something that was silenced, present only in erased forms, in hardly detectable traces. My most important method of restoring these gaps in the record was to research the personal life of the artist, and to find (so-to-speak) Freudian “slips of the tongue” in art works, in their verbal manifestations, as well as in the discourse around them, in order to deconstruct the universal language and rhetoric applied to them. I was seeking blind spots or blanks in the biographical, curatorial, or philological record; I tried to restore thematic or symbolic content where it has been “dethematized” or abstracted, to “listen to” silences and gaps as clues to repressed contents. My aim was to investigate the works of an artist who is unquestionably known, accepted, and praised in 20th century Hungarian art history. I sought to put a new magnifying lens to her work, and find the reasons behind the erasures or concealment of Jewishness and with it the memory of WWII, the Holocaust, and to ask what all these had to do with the gender of the artist.

When exploring how the memory of the Holocaust appeared in art during the Kádár era in Hungary, the work of well-known artists can be investigated from earlier hidden perspectives. The female sculptor, Erzsébet Schaár (1908-1975) has an unquestionable high position, a safe and stable, canonized place in modern, 20th century Hungarian art history. From here, I consider the work of this well-known artist in Hungary, seeking to restore the intersectional thematics of femininity and Jewish experience to its interpretation.

Acknowledged, Canonized, Universalized

In Erzsébet Schaár's art academy study file from 1926, we can find a box that reads "Religion: Israelite."¹⁰ Later, outside of this document, Erzsébet Schaár's Jewish origin is hardly, if ever, mentioned in art history texts and review articles. In 1935, she married the sculptor, Tibor Vilt, and having a non-Jewish husband, she probably was exempted for a time from the ever-stricter anti-Jewish laws; by 1944, however, she had to go into hiding. She was hidden in a Catholic cloister in a Hungarian town, Miskolc. The cloister was a place where Margit Slachta, a Catholic female monk and politician whose activity and worldview would be worth further elaboration, was hiding Jews. Erzsébet Schaár got into this place through the connections of her husband, who himself as well was a deserter.¹¹ She was hiding under the name, Erzsi Wilt, as if she were a novice, the "sister" of Tibor Wilt.¹² Erzsébet Schaár's special situation lies in its complexity: she was Jewish, female, artist, also the wife of an artist, a sculptor. A tragic family event was both connected to the war, as well as to her husband: right after the end of WWII, when she, her sister, her husband reunited in the Budafok family house, her sister committed suicide.¹³ The house remained Erzsébet Schaár's artistic topic throughout her life, the house as a ghost house kept haunting her. The house and the uncanny figures within it are always subjects of art historical interpretations of her work, but exclusively in an abstract, universal sense and in a language that denies this imagery any particularity

¹⁰ I thank art historian Ildikó Nagy for this information. See the archive of Képzőművészeti Főiskola beiratkozási lapjai. 11/a vol. 118. 1925-26, 2nd semester.

¹¹ In 1985, Margit Slachta posthumously received the award of the "The Righteous Gentile" and has a tree in Yad Vashem.

¹² The spelling of the name Vilt is the "artistic" version of the original name, Wilt. Ilona Mona, *Slachta Margit* (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 1997), 159.

¹³ What really happened is still a secret. I am grateful for our conversation with the late Pál Wilt, the artist's son.

of reference. So, although Erzsébet Schaár did not personally experience the worst horrors of the Holocaust, deportation and the concentration camp, what she experienced in 1944 and 1945 was impossible to assimilate into normal life. At the same time, it was impossible to avoid thinking of it for the rest of her life.

Certain aspects of Erzsébet Schaár's art, being a canonized Hungarian artist, have remained hidden, or even erased from the discourse of art history. Her sculptures are interpreted in abstract general terms and never in special "particularist" ways. Anybody who was identified as a Jew in 1944, however, could not avoid in some manner reckoning with the situation, no matter if he/she had experienced Jewishness in religious belief, as a cultural identification, or even very limited, tenuous forms of identification with Judaism and Jewish ethnicity. Even if he/she rejects identification with Jewishness that was, paradoxically, a typical form of identification as well. Actually in Hungary during the Kádár era this was a significant, widespread way of (non)identification with Jewish ethnicity, family history, and cultural inheritance. Socialism made possible – in ways welcomed by many Hungarian Jews – the subsumption of their Jewish particularity, which had proven so problematic and even fatal in the past, into a universally human future being instituted through the new socialist order. In Erzsébet Schaár's reception there is an erased trace of her Jewishness. However, a part of her personality and work is erased as well. My hypothesis is that her art can be interpreted from this point of view, despite the fact that she avoided explicitly dealing with it, and that art historians have done so as well.

Her Jewish origin is referred to in a euphemistic way in art history writings. László Beke, the author the main monographic study, written in 1973, refers to these years in a way that her Jewishness is not explicitly stated. Writing about the years of the war, especially the time of the German occupation, he states: "Then came the difficult years of the war, persecution, hidings. The possibility of peaceful work was interrupted for a long time, however there is a certain continuity between the turn of the 1930s and the

first half of the 1940s, secured by a few important portraits.”¹⁴ In other texts there is a gap in her biography. After the war years it is only the 1960s that are mentioned.¹⁵ Neither did she herself refer to her Jewishness, as she was not religious. She had been identified as a Jew by the gaze of Hungarian fascism, under the racial laws, and not by her own will or inner feeling. The seductive promise of the Kádár regime was that this gaze could be suspended by political decision, and that ethnic differences did not need to count any longer, as they had up till 1945; it seemed possible that one could not have to deal with one’s Jewishness, could forget it as a specter of the pre-socialist past. According to her son, Erzsébet Schaár hardly ever talked about the war, and she evoked only funny anecdotes about her hiding (e.g., stories about drinking rum while in the robe of a Catholic novice, or running away for three days in a fur coat without [false] papers).¹⁶

Another promise of the Kádár regime was the equality of men and women in all walks of life and art. Art was “good” or “bad” but gender neutral, and this was true both in official art, and the art outside of it, that is, non-propagandistic, non-socialist realist modern art or, later in the Kádár period, oppositional, neo-avant-garde art. Ever since the beginning of her career, Erzsébet Schaár had paid special attention to women; she portrayed outstanding female scholars, like Teréz Brunszvik, the founder of nursery schools or Vilma Hugonnay, the first Hungarian female medical doctor, as well as the artist’s own mother. She has sculptures dealing with “typically feminine” topics, like “Kozmetikusnál” [At the Cosmetician], “Miniszoknya” [Mini Skirt] etc. or “Bundás nők” [“Women in Fur”](1964). This latter one is interpreted as her “surprising new voice” not only in her own career but also in Hungarian sculpture. It is connected to some other pieces by her

¹⁴ László Beke, *Schaár Erzsébet* (Budapest: Corvina, 1973), 11. All the translations are mine, H.T.

¹⁵ Péter Kovács, *Schaár Erzsébet* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1995), 3.

¹⁶ Again, I am grateful for our conversation with the late Pál Wilt, the artist’s son.

("Halott katonák" ["Dead Soldiers"], "Szerelmesek" ["Lovers"]). As Péter Kovács argues, Schaár's works are "solitary figures in space, often reminding of Giacometti's similar figures."¹⁷ These women creatures "preening themselves" were irritating in the prudish atmosphere of the 1960s.¹⁸ The art historian goes on: "Schaár intensified the openness of the scene by the sad stature of the figures: the small knoblike heads, chicken legs and between the two the furs covering the 'essence.'"¹⁹

The interpretation above uses abstract, universal human terms, connecting the piece to a respected, acknowledged male artist, Giacometti, and talking about the general atmosphere of the 1960s. And also considers irritating the covering of the female body's sexually "important" parts. This is challenged by the fact that in the official women's magazine *Nők Lapja* where fur coats were advertised, her sculpture was reproduced.²⁰ Advertisement itself was paradoxical in socialism, in the economy of shortage. In 1960s Hungary, fashionable female cloth items were in shortage, and it could not be taken for granted that one could buy them just by walking into a department store. These fashion sections of popular magazines were embodying gendered fashion desires, rather than offering real choice, instead pretending that they were easily acquirable. This special section "Women in Fur" figuring expensive looking but actually cheap, even ersatz furs (made of hare, or cat, or plastic), included the picture of Erzsébet Schaár's sculpture, "Women in Fur" (1964). In the art history context it is the femininity that is erased from the interpretation, while in the context of a woman's magazine it is the expensive, "capitalist context" of the fur coat which is evoked in a socialist way. The sculpture, accordingly, is contextualized as a natural, available, easily accessible "socialist" femininity. Let me add that the fur as a tactile, sensual material is often charged with implication of

¹⁷ Kovács, *Schaár Erzsébet*, 10.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Nők Lapja*, December 9, 1967.

female dominance, as a reference to Sacher-Masoch's notorious novel *Venus in Furs* would suggest.

I would like to connect "Women in Fur," to one further personal aspect from an anecdote quoted by the artist's son. When she was still in Budafok, during the war years, in hiding in the family house, once she put on an opossum fur coat and escaped to downtown Budapest in this fur. She was arrested and released after three days.²¹ This anecdote connects the fur coat thus also to the war and her experience of concealment in a moment of personal and collective danger, and to her longing for freedom and femininity.

Erzsébet Schaár's art has been interpreted as being full of anxiety, sadness, death, mourning, solitude, and she herself has been characterized as lonely. However, interpretations never specified the reasons of her "loneliness," her sorrow. Her most well-known work is "Utca" [The Street] (1974, Székesfehérvár), completed one year before her death: "As soon as it [The Street] was completed – both by the opinion of fellow artists and critics, it proved to be not only the major work of Erzsébet Schaár but also an outstanding work of Hungarian art of its time."²² Art historians have interpreted her works as investigating artistic problems, space and the solitary human being in space. "The Street" is a summary of the whole oeuvre, not only in a figurative sense but also in a more literal one: she used her earlier works, her portrait of her mother among others, and built them into this new composition, creating a new "whole" from the earlier pieces. It is a construction that today we would call an installation, with doors and windows, almost like a stage. We can look behind the open windows and doors to see plaster masks, sculptures, portraits, figures of great Hungarians, a Marx head as well. Her figures in "The Street" are ghost figures, their faces are like death masks, figures from the past.

²¹ The story is quoted in the film, *Századfordító magyarok - Schaár Erzsébet (1908–1975)* dir. by Péter Fitz, János Gulyás, Pál Wilt.

²² Péter Kovács, *A tegnap szobrai* (Székesfehérvár: Életünk könyvek, 1992), 47.

Art historians often single out one of Erzsébet Schaár's experiences as crucial. After returning home from abroad she describes her experience in the Budafok house as follows:

I opened the windows and the doors. They stood firmly, as if they cut the air, as if the air had been a solid mass. I was looking at the three doors opening to three adjacent rooms. Each opened to different directions. And I was standing there in the middle, as if I were a small point in space, and the three edges of the three doors, each in different directions.²³

This is interpreted as a universal space experience, from which her characteristic topics and themes of doors and windows derive. This experience again is universalized. In the aforementioned film about Erzsébet Schaár, for example, an art historian explains: she returned home and wanted to clean the house, so she began by opening the doors and windows. But, according to the art historian Márta Kovalovszky's interpretation in the film, instead of having the experience of a "cleaning housewife," she had a universal space experience of an artist, an inspiration for her art.

One art historian called "The Street" a national pantheon, and emphasized her love of her native country.²⁴ Yet in the first exhibition of "The Street" a group of five pieces was included, called "Sachsenhauseni emlékmű" ["Memorial for Sachsenhausen"], four figures, with block-like body and plaster-cast male heads and hands, and a fifth, a female block figure raising her arm as if crying for help. This is, of course, a direct reference to a concentration camp and a memorial to the Holocaust. Many of Erzsébet Schaár's small size sculptures were interpreted as sculptures longing to be realized at larger scales, and also as "Emlékmű" ["Memorial"].²⁵ However it remained always unspecified: memorial to what? what should be remembered? All this memorial content was, paradoxically, exclusively construed in abstract terms.

²³ The artist quoted in Beke, *Schaár Erzsébet*, 19.

²⁴ Péter Kovács in the film quoted above.

²⁵ Beke, *Schaár Erzsébet*, 11.

Another trace of what has been erased in the mainstream art history is visible through the artist's relationship with her close friend, the poet János Pilinszky. Pilinszky, a Catholic believer, was a soldier in the Nazi ally Hungarian army, and saw the trains transporting Jewish people. He became sick and was put in a concentration camp hospital. Due to these events he could see life in a concentration camp, and what concentration camp inmates went through. In several of his poems he wrote about these memories (e.g. "Kz-oratórium ["KZ Oratory"], "Francia fogoly" ["French Prisoner"]).²⁶ His poem entitled "Auschwitz" is dedicated to Erzsébet Schaár. Pilinszky and Schaár worked together on a book entitled "Tér és kapcsolat" ["Space and Relation"] as well. This relation to Pilinszky offers an important clue that "spaces" in Schaár's work are not just abstract ambiances, but rather zones of historical experience, preservation, and memory; and that "relations" are not simply compositional, but social forms, entailing political, gender, and ethnic particularity.

Erzsébet Schaár's work was typically characterized as the representation of an emptied-out world, infinite solitude, tenuously housing human beings who are defenseless at the mercy of the space around them, freezing in immense space.²⁷ This is a world of a dreary silence left by human beings. They evoke feeling of anguish and alienation that – as Péter Kovács states – was shared by many for decades.²⁸ This generalist interpretation of a female artist facilitated her acceptance into the world of "true" art. In the canonical interpretation of her works, her particular stories, her Jewishness, and her female identity did not play a role. These were erased, or more precisely her female identity, her recurrent stories, were sometimes mentioned, but only for the purpose of denying that these might have anything to do with her art. However, there are traces that indicate something more personal

²⁶ János Pilinszky, *Összegyűjtött versei* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1987), 59-70, and 40.

²⁷ Kovács, *A tegnap szobrai*, 107.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

that was erased. Schaár herself did not want to identify herself as Jewish; she wanted to forget a traumatic past linked to having Jewishness ascribed to her. This experience, partly still a secret, is both personal and connected to the war, to the persecution of the Jews, and ultimately, to the cultural politics of socialism as well. Her personal reticence was reciprocated by the systematic erasures imposed by the Kádár regime. The price of being the “happiest barrack” in the socialist world was to avoid publicly discussing anything that would have forced Hungarian society to face the past and its own responsibility in the persecution and attempted extermination of Jewish people. However, Schaár’s female subject position is likewise effaced in her work. Schaár’s particular experiences, including those associated with her femininity, were silenced by herself, by the regime and by the universalist claim of modern art. However, the facts that one of her compositions has been planned to be installed in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, or that János Pilinszky dedicated his Auschwitz poem to her, are clear signs that what seems an empty void includes her Jewishness, her personal life story as a Jewish woman and as a female artist. My aim here was to excavate the place where seemingly there is nothing, and to contribute to looking into the intersection of multiple erasures, or as Marsha Meskimmon says, to mobilize what is muted for new understandings.²⁹

²⁹ Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art*, 16.

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Comparing (Con)texts

“Masculine”/“Feminine”
in Autobiographical Accounts
of the Warsaw Ghetto:
Comparative Analysis of the Memoirs
of Cywia Lubetkin
and Icchak Cukierman

ALEKSANDRA UBERTOWSKA

The history of the marginalization of the Holocaust and of women's wartime experience also has its local dimension.¹ In the period of the Polish People's Republic, the terms on which the Holocaust was present in the Polish public sphere were of a peculiar kind. Although there were some differences between particular periods separated by the caesurae of 1956 and 1968, it may be said, with some simplification, that when the Holocaust was recalled in historiography and in works of art, it was in a severely censored version, as a matter of lower rank than the martyrology of Poles. It was also presented in forms that camouflaged a painful truth: that Poles played their part in the war not only as witnesses or rescuers of Jews, but also as

¹ This article has been written as a part of the project “The Holocaust – the Margins of Discourse: An Analysis of Essays, Women's Autobiographies and Scholarly Autobiographies in the Literature about the Shoah,” financed by National Science Centre (NCN) in 2011-2014 following the decision NN 103 443240.

co-perpetrators of the Holocaust.² The second of the matters on which silence was maintained, that is women's experience of the war, figured in no reflection in the humanities in Poland at all, although the autobiographical and fictional works of Zofia Nałkowska and Seweryna Szmaglewska and the sculptures of Alina Szapocznikow were part of the canon of Polish twentieth-century art. As the success of Hanna Krall's documentary *To Outwit God* testifies, it is characteristic of this period that the modest attempts made to incorporate into Polish memory the Jewish experience of the ghetto and of extermination were subordinated to the perspective of a courageous male hero.³ The point of view of the woman-fighter or of the women who represented the Jewish civilian population was a mere complement to this perspective.

The caesura marking the moment when political, institutional, and methodological frames appeared that made it possible to deal with the topic of the female dimension of the Holocaust was the year 1989. Only then did research trends, as well as academic and social initiatives, arise that began to restore the memory of this previously unspoken-of dimension of history. The seminars and publications of the Warsaw Center for Research on the Extermination of the Jews deserve to be mentioned here, as do the monographs and articles of such Polish feminist scholars as Agata Araszkiewicz, Inga Iwasiów and Bożena Karwowska.⁴

² See: Dorota Krawczyńska and Grzegorz Wołowicz, "Fazy i sposoby pisania o Zagładzie w literaturze polskiej," in *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady*, eds. A. Brodzka-Wald et al. (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2000); Dariusz Libionka, "Polskie piśmiennictwo na temat zorganizowanej i indywidualnej pomocy Żydom (1945-2008)," *Zagłada Żydów: Studia i Materiały* 4 (2008): 17-81; Jan T. Gross, *Wokół 'Śsadiów': Polemiki i wyjaśnienia* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2003).

³ Hanna Krall, *The Subtenant and To Outwit God*, trans. Janusz Anders, Laurence Weschler (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992).

⁴ Jan Grabowski, *"Ja tego Żyda znam": Szantażowanie Żydów w Warszawie 1939-1943* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFIS PAN, 2004); Dariusz Libionka and Lawrence Weinbaum, *Bohaterowie, Hochsztaplerzy, Opisywa-*

However, the theme of "women and the Holocaust," both in Polish and in world humanities, is still on the whole a controversial field rather than an established area of academic research. Many factors have contributed to this state of affairs. First, the main current in feminist thought, while it opens up certain research possibilities, limits them at the same time. We may here recall the books of Lucy Irigaray or Julia Kristeva, for example, both popular among female Polish scholars. These extraordinarily inspiring studies, which grew out of the tradition of Lacanian neo-psychoanalysis, do not take history into their field of consideration at all. They understand the feminine in terms outside history, and ignore ethnic, racial, and local identity. Other women scholars, if they include history within the framework of their research, often expose the difficulties connected with the problem when defined in this way. Sylviane Agacinski, for example, states that history and war constitute an area in which women are intruders, where they have no right to appear in either the role of protagonist or subject.⁵ It is thus difficult to find a language or methodology that can describe the particular quality of women's experience of history.

The most ambitious and consistent methodological attempt to adapt gender thinking to contemporary historiography was proposed by the American scholar Joan Wallach Scott. In her article, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," she defines gender as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between sexes" and – following the trail blazed by Michel Foucault – she treats this category as a form by which the relationship to power is marked. In her understanding,

cze: *Wokół Żydowskiego Związku Wojskowego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFIS PAN, 2011); Bożena Karwowska, *Ciało, seksualność, obozy zagłady* (Kraków: Universitas, 2009); Inga Iwasiów, "Centralna plec cywila," in *Wojna – doświadczenie i zapis: Nowe źródła, problemy, metody badawcze*, eds. Sławomir Buryła, Paweł Rodak (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), 399-415; Agata Araszkiewicz, "Wypowiadam wam moje życie." *Melancholia Zuzanny Ginczanki* (Warszawa: Ośka, 2001).

⁵ See: Sylviane Agacinski, *Parity of the Sexes* (New York: Columbia University Press 2001).

“gender” is a historically changing category, culturally conditioned, “produced” in various kinds of public discourse.⁶ As such, it may contribute to the reinterpretation and transference of traditional explanations of important historical events and the male/female relations connected with them.

However, despite the controversies mentioned above, the issue of the female dimension of the Holocaust is present in the reflections of historians, literary historians and sociologists concerned with World War II, including those who distance themselves from any connection with feminist thought, such as Raul Hilberg or Nechama Tec.⁷ The books of these two (especially Tec’s *Resilience and Courage*) are valuable, for they provide us with empirical evidence of the differences in the fortunes of Jewish women as opposed to Jewish men during the war. In her book, Nechama Tec formulates the concept of “gender specific measures” and on this basis distinguishes distinctive models of roles and survival strategies (“distinct gender attitudes”).⁸ Women’s strategies, as defined by this scholar, include emotionality, protectiveness, ability to adapt, but also the tendency to become victims; while men’s strategies are heroism, activity, rationalism, and the capacity to present armed resistance.

The authors mentioned, however, represent the most conservative research approach, which Moshe Rosman drawing on the writings of Joan Wallach Scott and adopting her findings to studies in the history of Jewish women calls “additive” or “compensatory.”⁹ According to him, this approach to women’s history

⁶ Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 42.

⁷ Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945* (New York: Aaron Asher Books 1992); Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁸ Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 3, 264.

⁹ Moshe Rosman, “The History of Jewish Women in Early Modern Poland: An Assessment,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 18 (2007): 29.

employs measures and concepts that are drawn from universal (but in essence androcentric) historiography. As such, it differs in a fundamental way from "herstory," represented by such scholars as Wallach Scott, Marlene Heinemann or Joan Ringelheim.¹⁰ For these, the female dimension of history is an autonomous value that cannot be reduced to the concepts or axiologies that dominate World War II historiography, whose focus is mainly on dramatic events in which the civilian population did not participate. It is the researchers from this circle who have made the most radical attempt to redefine history from the woman's perspective, questioning the validity of the stereotypical views that present men as heroic, active, and capable of effective defence, while women are passive, emotional figures, as if they were condemned to the role of defenceless victims.

For the purposes of the present article, however, the most useful of the analytical methods proposed by Moshe Rosman turns out to be the third, which he calls "transformative."¹¹ This is based on the assumption that inspirations deriving from various trends within feminism, sometimes very distant from historiography, contribute to the reformulation of the image of historical events, as well as of the cultural conditions that define them. That is to say, they lead to an unveiling of the conventional character of gender relations.

It seems that the transformative approach offers a sound basis for analysis that avoids the one-sidedly existential understanding of the gender aspects of war in the particular dimension that is of most relevance to me as a literary scholar. In this way of thinking, two planes will overlap: first, that of individual experience, set in a defined historical time and in defined social structures; second, that of the registration of this experience, which is bound up

¹⁰ See: Joan Ringelheim, "The Unethical and Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1 (1984): 74-76; Marlene E. Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

¹¹ Rosman, "The History of Jewish Women," 31.

with the history of autobiography as a genre – a history determined by the category of *gender*. I thus assume, developing here inspirations derived from the articles by Joan Wallach Scott, that historical experience and gender identity that is connected with it are to the same degree both mediated by the text, and construed and “manufactured” by it. The focus of my analysis is thus not so much the “truth” of the experiences of Jewish women and men during the Holocaust as the construction of the gender subject in autobiographical texts.

The “Weeping Man” and the “Woman-General”

In this paper I shall make an attempt at a comparative analysis of the memoirs of two participants in the Jewish resistance movement in the Warsaw Ghetto, who were the co-creators of the Jewish Fighting Organization and leaders of the April Uprising: Cywia (Cecylia) Lubetkin and Icchak (Antek) Cukierman, also known by the anglicized versions of their names as Zivia Lubetkin and Yitzhak Zuckerman. Their histories are in a certain way twinned, as if one were the *alter ego* of the other, and this impression is strengthened by the fact that the two were linked by a private relationship – a legendary great love, crowned by marriage. The fact that in the biographies of these authors, individual, and communal trajectories of fortune interpenetrate in a manner that is symmetrical and complementary, contributes to the exceptional character of these memoirs. Both came from the eastern provinces of the Polish Second Republic: Cywia – from the little town of Byteń near Słonim, Icchak Cukierman – from Vilnius. They originated from traditional Jewish families, but at the beginning of the 1930s they lived a wandering life, subordinated to activity in the Zionist youth organizations Frajhajt and Dror, linked with the Poale Zion Left (Poalej Syjon Lewica) party. Thus, they lived in a peculiar kind of enclave, relatively isolated from Polish society; for the choice of Zionism and Yiddish or Hebrew was synonymous with rejection of the

offer of assimilation or cultural integration.¹² This had its consequences during the war since poor knowledge of Polish and of Polish customs made it considerably more difficult (especially for Cywia) to hide on Warsaw's "Aryan side."

They spent the beginning of the war in Lwów and Kowel, occupied by the Soviet army, but by 1940 they had already moved to Warsaw and came to live in the area of the ghetto, in the Dror kibbutz at no. 34, Dzielna Street. In 1942, when information about the first acts of extermination of Jews in Ponary and Chełm began to reach the Warsaw Ghetto, preparations were begun, on the initiative, among others, of young Zionists, to create an armed organization that would be capable of presenting resistance to the Germans. Finally, in July 1942, during the "great campaign" of deportation, the Jewish Fighting Organization (JFO) came into being under the leadership of Mordechaj Anielewicz of the Haszomer Hacair organization.¹³ Cywia and Icchak became deputies of the JFO commandant, which, particularly in the case of Lubetkin, had a symbolic significance – she became an incarnation of the myth of the "woman-general," one of the first women in history to carry out the function of an army leader.

The two of them spent virtually the whole of the war together. Together they ran the teaching activities for the young Zionists, helped in the creation of the kibbutz in the Czerniaków district, and finally co-planned the tactics of resistance to the Germans as they prepared for the final destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. They were only parted for a few weeks during the April Uprising in the ghetto, when Cukierman represented the JFO on the Aryan side, striving for arms and support from the Polish underground. When the uprising in the ghetto collapsed, they hid on the Aryan

¹² See: Natalia Aleksium, "Ruch syjonistyczny w Polsce do 1944 roku," in: *Dokąd dalej? Ruch syjonistyczny w Polsce (1944-1950)* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo TRIO, 2002).

¹³ Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *Getto warszawskie: Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFIS PAN, 2001), 672.

side and in 1944 took part in the battles of the Warsaw Uprising. After the war they co-organized the emigration movement of Jewish survivors to Palestine.¹⁴ In Israel they founded the famous kibbutz of Lochamej Ha-Getaot (named after the Ghetto Fighters). Importantly, too, they were both witnesses at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, a fact that was noted by Hannah Arendt, among others, in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

We can learn the history of their lives from the volumes of their memoirs: Cywia Lubetkin's *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt* and Icchak Cukierman's *A Surplus of Memory. Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*.¹⁵ Both books have a complicated editorial history, which certainly structured these wartime memoirs to a considerable degree. Lubetkin's volume of memoirs arose with the intention of publication in installments in the columns of the Zionist journal *Dawar*, while a few of the final chapters appeared in several different collective volumes.¹⁶ The fact that these memoirs proceed from the years 1946-47 is important, since it means that the record of the events related arose immediately after the war, from a close temporal perspective. Cukierman's book, in contrast, is composed of recollections recorded on audio tape by Joshka Rabinowicz in the mid-1970s and edited after the death of the author.¹⁷ These editorial circumstances certainly had no

¹⁴ See: Aleksy, *Dokąd dalej?*.

¹⁵ Cywia Lubetkin, *Zagłada i powstanie*, trans. Maria Krych (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny/Książka i Wiedza, 1999); Icchak Cukierman, *Nadmiar pamięci (Siedem owych lat): Wspomnienia 1939-1946*, trans. Zofia Perelmutter, ed. M. Turski (Warszawa: PWN, 1999). The books analyzed in this article have been published in English as: Zivia Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, ed. Yehiel Yanay (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hamevchad Publishing House, 1981) and Yitzchak Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, trans. Barbara Hershov (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). The author of the present text analyzed these memoirs in their Polish translations and the fragments appearing in English have been translated from the Polish editions for the purposes of the current article.

¹⁶ Lubetkin, *Zagłada i powstanie*, 13-14.

¹⁷ Cukierman, *Nadmiar pamięci*, v.

small influence on the shape of the text. However, there are clear differences visible in its narrational, compositional and rhetorical structuring: differences that bear an evident authorial signature. These memoirs reveal the personality and temperament of the author, who is known also from other books of memoirs such as those of Chawka Folman-Raban or Mark Edelman, as well as his attitude to defined values and ideas.¹⁸ They also, finally, show their involvement in complex gender constructs dependent on centuries of traditional and social processes.

A comparative reading of the two volumes reveals a significant property of this "memorial diptych" that demands interpretation: the autobiographies of Lubetkin and Cukierman are parallel and symmetrical on the plane of experience, but completely divergent on the plane of narration. The manner of ordering the material, of accenting particular sequences, of establishing the rhetorical voice that serves to relate the war history; the choice of a particular strategy to evaluate the world described – all reveal the constructivist character of these autobiographies. Looking at these so different accounts, it is difficult to recognize the contours of the same dramatic history, that of the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Of course, by accenting the constructivist dimension of these wartime autobiographies, I do not intend to undermine the credibility of the two books or to detract from their powerful referentiality. Quite the contrary: both volumes of memoirs are here treated in a manner congruent with the assumptions of contemporary historiography, which acknowledged the status of a historical source to Holocaust testimony, though presented within defined compositional and narrative frames.¹⁹

¹⁸ Chawka Folman-Raban, *Nie rozstałam się z nimi...*, trans. I. Wajsbrot, D. Sternberg (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2000); Hanna Krall, *Zdążyć przed panem Bogiem* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977).

¹⁹ See: Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

The domain of Icchak Cukierman's account is memory, its work that of a free reconstruction of recollections. This determines to a considerable degree the construction of the book. The titular "surplus of memory" perfectly characterizes the author's narrative strategy, whose most notable feature is minutely detailed description. Where the model "memorial narration" of the Holocaust survivor is marked by traumatic gaps, "empty places," Cukierman constructs the story of the ghetto from facts, surnames, and the nuances of varied situations. There are many threads to his narrative, and it is fluent, expansive, "talkative," while at the same time scrupulous with regard to documentation. Not surprisingly, then, Cukierman's book is more than twice as long as Lubetkin's recollections. Of course this garrulousness, the creation of the author as a teller of stories, must be treated with a certain scepticism. It often conceals the tragic truth of the devastation caused in the lives of survivors by the traumatic consequences of the Holocaust. This is the case, for example, in the fragment where Cukierman recalls how reading Balzac in the most terrible moments in the ghetto soothed him in the same way as today two bottles of cognac do. The flowing narration blurs the drastic nature of the fate of the survivor, the tragedy of the hero who cannot free himself from his dramatic recollections of war.

As an author, Cukierman is unusually aware of the mechanisms that govern the emergence of an autobiographical text, especially the function of memory in building the narrative. He writes of this in one of the most important parts of his book:

I have frequently met people who have simply expelled some of their experiences from their memory. I, on the other hand, suffer from a "surplus of memory." In a given moment during a conversation, I may not remember something that I wanted to talk about at that moment, but somewhere in my memory that event is recorded. I remember almost everything. I have an associative memory. I don't remember details in themselves. I always have whole images in my mind. Sometimes, as in a film, one event reminds me of another. This has its advantages, because I always see events as elements in the generality of a situation and I can explain why

this or that 'suddenly' happened.... I see events in their general frames: why did we behave like that? Or like that? Why did I go there and how did it come about?²⁰

"Surplus of memory" develops on several planes, of which the most extensive seems to be the one concerning the author's activity on behalf of Dror. Cukierman, accompanied by female couriers, travels to Kraków, meets the representatives of local branches of the organization, takes part in small armed actions. What is notable is that objective historical time does not constitute the constructional base of the autobiography; its presence is felt only rarely and it does not play an essential role. Instead, it is space that to a considerable degree organizes the order of the narrative, which develops in a rhythm of returns to the same places: the town house on Dzielna Street, the kibbutzim in the districts of Czerniaków and Grochów, where the author meets his friends from the halutz organization or JFO. Private digressions devoted to his wife, however, also constitute a significant dimension of the account. Subtle portrayals of Cywia, engaged in vigorous dispute at the JFO leaders' meetings or paying with bouts of depression for hiding on the Aryan side, create a counterpoint to the affairs of the Jewish community, a counterpoint that is so important as to constitute a partly autonomous dimension of the book.

Narration in Cukierman's book is marked by the play of axes that coincide and diverge, and by constantly changing perspectives. It is dynamic when the course of historical events accelerates, especially during the deportation campaign in July 1942 and during the effort to pacify the ghetto in January 1943; while in other places it wanders among repetitions and digressions. Cukierman's text is varied, stylistically inconstant; it employs a range of linguistic registers, from lofty pathos to irony and self-irony.

This property of style becomes particularly visible when we compare *Surplus of Memory* with Cywia Lubetkin's volume of memoirs, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*. Cywia Lubetkin's

²⁰ Cukierman, *Nadmiar pamięci*, 153.

relation is dominated by a sense of discipline and a certain conciseness. Whereas Cukierman reconstructs the memory of the Holocaust from trifles, details, and personal threads, the narrator of Lubetkin's volume moves on the level of synthetic assessment of the situation. She is quite consistent in this strategy, with the one exception of the introductory paragraphs that recall the genesis of the memoirs, paragraphs addressed (perhaps) to the reader or editor, and exposing the "difficulty of speech," or even the impossibility of telling about the horrors of the Holocaust, the feeling that in this situation, the traditional conventions and vocabulary of story-telling reveal their drastic limitations:

It is difficult for me to speak. Probably there is some ultimate limit of experiences and shocks that a human being can bear. I did not believe that I could stand so much and yet still remain alive. In that world, among ruins and faced with death, without the slightest spark of hope, the smallest sign that humanity still existed on earth, when we had already lost the capacity to feel pain.... I have no words to express my feelings. Words have lost their value. Yet these same words were in use before the war, at its beginning, during its course. And after all this we still have to make use of this same language. So I long to communicate, to tell, so that you may hear and judge.²¹

These few auto-thematic reflections, however, originate as it were from beyond the horizon of the story told, which is subordinated to a rather clear rhetorical strategy, with which private notes indicating the traumatic traces of limit experiences in the individual case would be in conflict. For the reader of this volume, the prevailing impression most of the time is that Lubetkin's war autobiography is exceptionally one-dimensional. It is conducted consistently from the position of a Zionist activist and in principle it does not go beyond this point of view. Lubetkin's *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt* is an account with a thesis, an account intended to justify the view that only young Zionists were

²¹ Lubetkin, *Zagłada i powstanie*, 15-16.

capable of presenting armed resistance to the Nazis. The narrator consciously imposes limitations and restrictions on herself with regard to the means of expression, in order to construct a model history of the "new Jewish woman," who subordinates private life to communal aims. The private and intimate dimension of inter-personal events is here passed over in silence – evidently the author made a conscious and considered decision to place such events outside the horizon of the narrative, which is marked by strongly ideological features.

Sufficient proof that this is so is the fact that Icchak Cukierman appears in Lubetkin's account as a person with whom she has no special connection, as one of many comrades in armed conflict. The author, carefully selecting events and subjecting them to self-censorship, in such a way that they take on the character of a universal, exemplary history of Jewish resistance, nowhere mentions the love and attachment that united her with Cukierman. The differences between the two autobiographies are well illustrated by the way in which their authors describe the same event: Icchak's sojourn in the labor camp of Kampinos. For Icchak, this was the most traumatic experience of the war, where he rubbed shoulders with death, awaiting execution in a pit dug in the ground. This is why the author devotes a whole chapter to this sequence, and writes there, too, of Cywia's emotional reaction on his return from the camp. Lubetkin, in contrast, recalls this event only once, in the tone of one giving a report, as if this whole sequence of events had happened to someone completely unconnected with her, almost unknown to her personally.²²

In this way, then, the narrator, by erasing any personal accents from her wartime memoirs, strives to build an almost transparent, documentary account with the unquestionable qualities of a historical source. This is not to say that there are no sequences here in which the narrator takes the main part: scenes of deportation or battle in the ghetto, described from her point of view

²² Ibid., 52.

and indeed saturated with her emotions. It may even be said that a particular kind of emotionality is one of the markers of her style. However, the function of these elements of the text is secondary and subordinate to the ideological assumptions. The personal character of the account is here an important device that confirms the credibility of the events described; it is a realization of the topos of the “eye-witness” that is so characteristic of the literature of the Holocaust.²³ Besides this, the vector of the narrative is directed principally towards objects, to descriptions of events, space, and persons – who are actors in the historical process chronicled by the narrator of Lubetkin’s book.

Lubetkin’s book of memoirs possesses one dimension, a certain kind of “added value,” that is lacking in Cukierman’s memoirs. For a defined vision of history emerges from it, which takes on the form of a historiosophical outline of events, subordinated to a clear leading idea – the rise of the state of Israel. This theory may be acknowledged as a lay version of the messianic philosophy of history, which according to Walter Benjamin and Yerushalmi, is a typically Jewish style of thinking about the course of historical events.²⁴ Paradoxically, however, a message of conciliation may be read in Cywia Lubetkin’s memoirs, a message that endows Jewish suffering with meaning – as she herself says in the introduction to the book, it was possible to bear the Holocaust only in the name of the idea of “*erec Israel*,” in the name of the memory of friends who had reached pre-war Palestine. It may be acknowledged that the sacrifice of an intimate tone was also the price paid for the possibility of creating a meta-historical perspective in individual memoirs, a perspective that goes beyond the sphere of particular events and processes.

²³ See: James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 7-8.

²⁴ See: Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

Holocaust, Gender, Text

What, however, could be said to result from the confrontation of these books of memoirs for the Jewish "herstory" proposed by Joan Wallach Scott? In what relationship to one another do the gender identity of the authors, rooted in a defined cultural tradition, the structure of the text of the memoirs, and the auto-creation of their subject remain? Where shall one look for the gender features of the autobiographies under discussion here? Certainly not on the level of events, where (according to Nechama Tec) the registration of female and male patterns of behavior in extreme situations usually reveals itself. For in respect of this level, the fortunes of the main characters are no different, since Cywia takes on the role described by historians of the Holocaust as "masculine."²⁵ Her memoirs also lack "women's themes" such as, in Marlene Heinemann's terminology, love, pregnancy, mother-daughter relations, the threat of rape, and fear for the family.²⁶ These are, as it were, pushed out by the heroic episodes and the patterns of behavior associated with them that are so characteristic of androcentric historiography.

It seems to me that in considering this issue, interesting inspirations may be found in the theory of male and female autobiography created by such feminist literary scholars as Sidonie Smith and Leigh Gilmore.²⁷ These authors have sketched out models of autobiographical narration, concentrating on the question of the autobiographical "I" and particularly on the strategies by which the subject of confessional texts is constructed and linked with

²⁵ Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 1-20.

²⁶ Marlene E. Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

²⁷ See e.g.: Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Inga Iwasiów, *Gatunki i konfesje w badaniach "gender,"* in *Genologia dzisiaj*, eds. Włodzimierz Bolecki and Ireneusz Opacki (Warszawa: IBL, 2000), 33-46.

the genre tradition. As viewed by these theories, the categories of subject and narration are subject to gender conditioning, for of all the layers of textual organization or forms of utterance they are the most closely linked with self-expression, with expression of the identity of the individual. Male autobiographies (such as those of Saint Augustine, Sigmund Freud, or Jean Jacques Rousseau), which established the canon of the genre, are constructed, according to Smith, from the perspective of a strong subject. This subject is a finished entity, complete, rational, and "imperial" in relation to the reality described. Men's narratives, usually glorifying the lives of well-known writers, politicians or artists – and hence of human beings in relation to history and social life – have a linear character, aiming to develop an account of the formation of an outstanding individual. The subject of women's autobiographies, which, according to Smith, have created a peculiar anti-tradition of the genre, can be described as unstable, community-conscious, self-ironic, "nebulous." The autobiographical accounts created by women subjects also form structures of a different kind from the masculine type: discontinuous, dispersed, digressive, devoid of a strongly marked compositional frame.

On the surface, no direct correspondences exist between the rather abstract models of feminist scholars of autobiography mentioned above and the books of Lubetkin and Cukierman, so firmly rooted in historical experience. However, if we do not treat these models in too dogmatic a manner, and at the same time bear in mind the inspiring conceptions of Joan Wallach Scott, who underlines the destabilizing potential of the category of "gender" in historiography, they open up an essential dimension of the comparative analysis conducted here. We may assume that both books are examples of an apparent blurring of binary gender divisions and the related features of autobiographical texts. For Cywia Lubetkin's autobiography turns out to be closer to the male model, as a text that is coherent and linear, told from the point of view of a strong narrator who exhibits that part of her identity that belongs to the public sphere. In this context, Cukierman's autobiography

appears, in contrast, as a text that is dispersed and undisciplined, dominated by the stance of a doubting, self-ironizing narrator who rejects the male ideal of authoritarian domination in favor of the conviction that the final version of events must be the outcome of painful negotiation with other people and above all with oneself. In both texts, binary gender oppositions are not only not reproduced, but conversely, they undergo weakening; they "dissolve" in the network of constantly changing, dramatic historical circumstances and the disintegrating conventions of their registration.

It appears that two images that recur in Cukierman's autobiographical narrative are significant for this mixing of orders. The first of these is a scene presenting Cywia making a speech at the Dror meeting and underlining the import of her words by a "masculine" gesture – striking her hand on the table top.²⁸ The second is a self-referential mirror image of the author – sequences in which Cukierman weeps with pain, with the sense of helplessness or with fear; perhaps the most suggestive impression is left by the scene of tears shed in the expectation of death in the Kampinos camp.²⁹ The image of the "man who weeps" returns in many variations and becomes something of a hallmark of the author of *Surplus of Memory*.

These complications within the framework of gender divisions, or rather their textual representations, can be explained in various ways. Undoubtedly, the character of the Zionist movement of socialist orientation (the so-called non-Marxist Zionist left) from which Dror arose, encouraged a loosening of the relations regulating social life. The authors, living in an urban kibbutz in the territory of the ghetto, inhabited an alternative world that existed on the fringes of traditional societies; they contested the institutions both of the Orthodox patriarchal Jewish family and of bourgeois life. Certainly the war – as an event that disturbed traditional social divisions – contributed in addition to the dynamizing of these social changes and caused a loosening of the mechanisms

²⁸ Cukierman, *Nadmiar pamięci*, 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

that “produced” womanhood within the frames of local cultures.³⁰ In any case, in traditional Jewish culture (“shtetl” culture) there were also examples of modes of femininity that crossed over the border between the worlds of men and of women, such as that of the “eshet hayil,” the “courageous woman” who maintains her family by her own labor, or the “cossacs,” the enterprising owners of small shops or even pieces of land.³¹ Also not without significance for the ideologizing of Lubetkin’s memoirs was the status of the text’s audience; as we remember, her memoirs were in the greater part addressed to the young inhabitants of kibbutzim in post-war Palestine.

However, it is necessary to draw attention to another dimension of these complications within gender roles and autobiographical models. Is it not the case that Cywia Lubetkin, who as a deputy leader in the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto became an incarnation of the phantasma of the “woman knight” or “woman general,” felt uncertain in this role?³² Should not one assume that she was accompanied by an awareness of being an intruder in a sphere of social life that was dominated by men? Then the “masculine,” lofty-heroic style of the autobiographical record could be interpreted as a manifesto-like gesture: by effacing the narrator’s femininity, it was an attempt to strengthen her authority and confirm her right to be a subject in the field of history and historiography.

In turn, the dispersed composition of Cukierman’s autobiography, as well as the risky contraventions in the area of masculine models of behavior in extreme situations (we recall “the image of the weeping man”), in this context appear as a sign that the male author is at home in history; at the very outset, he occupies

³⁰ See: Margaret Higonnet, introduction to *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, eds. M. Higonnet et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 1-18.

³¹ See: Rosman, “The History of Jewish Women,” 50-55.

³² See: Maria Janion’s paper on the Polish tradition of the “woman knight.” Maria Janion, “Kobieta-Rycerz,” in *Kobiety i duch inności* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo ‘Sic!’, 2006), 78-102.

a position that requires no justification. In spite of the fact, that in Jewish culture ruled many patterns of masculinity (also the “weak” patter of men), we may assume that the field of choice of forms of expression in an account of war is broader in the case of a male author, his position less hampered.³³ Cukierman may exist in the text as a war hero even when he carries on a game with the conventions of the genre and with gender stereotypes. A woman, however, in order to place herself firmly in the tradition of war epic as a major figure, must “dress up” as a man and subject her discourse to masculinization. Only then will her experiences and their literary expression take on significance; only then will she become visible and comprehensible in a war text.

Trans. Jean Ward

³³ Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkowitz and Ann Pellegrini, “Strange Bedfellows: An Introduction,” in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 1-18.

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Gendered Intergenerational Spaces of Holocaust and Communist Traumas in Anca Vlasopolos' Transatlantic Memoir *No Return Address*

DANA MIHĂILESCU

During Communist times in Romania, talking about the Holocaust and the country's responsibility during World War II was taboo, or at best reduced to signaling the extermination of Jews from the Hungarian-occupied territory of Transylvania. After the fall of Communism at the end of 1989, official recognition of Romania's involvement in World War II deportations and killings came extremely late, in November 2004, in the wake of negationist discourses involving integral denial, deflective negation and trivialization of the Holocaust through comparison. This happened after then president, Ion Iliescu, at long last conceded to establishing the International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, a forum led by experts and scholars under the guidance of the famous writer and survivor Elie Wiesel. The final report of the commission was released in the fall of 2004, and it represented the first officially sanctioned source to acknowledge the direct implication of general Ion Antonescu's regime in the perpetration of World War II atrocities and, by extension, Romanian responsibility for Holocaust deportations and killings.¹

¹ For further details about the Romanians' controversial positions on the Holocaust and the final report of the International Commission on

Nevertheless, in-depth scholarship on Romanian Jewish women's Holocaust (post)memories is an emergent category.² It is the case primarily because published memoirs by Holocaust women survivors or daughters of survivors from Romania are still pretty scarce, most of them belonging to survivors who chose to live outside Romania after the end of the war.³

the Holocaust in Romania, see Alexandru Florian, "The Perception of the Holocaust in Historiography and in the Romanian Media," in *Local History, Transnational Memory in the Romanian Holocaust*, eds. Valentina Glajar and Jeanine Teodorescu (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 19-45.

² For an excellent survey of the most recent historiographical works on the Romanian Holocaust, their novel insights in contrast to earlier publications, but also their limitations, see Roland Clark, "New Models, New Questions: Historiographical Approaches to the Romanian Holocaust," *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire* 19, no. 2 (April 2012): 303-320. Most importantly for the purposes of my study, Clark concludes his essay by noting that "[t]he field [of Romanian Holocaust studies] still lacks the nuanced perspectives that cultural and gender histories have contributed to studies of the Holocaust elsewhere" (315), a gap I hope to begin filling with the present essay.

³ The kindred books I have in mind include: Hédi Fried's 1992 memoir *Life Scraps: The Way to and From Auschwitz* written in Sweden; Miriam Korber-Bercovici's 1945 *Ghetto Diary* from the Transnistrian camp of Djurin in which the author was imprisoned, also partially published in English in Alexandra Zapruder ed. *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press/Yale Nota Bene, 2004); Sara Tuvel Bernstein's remembrance of anti-Semitic Romania and life in Ravensbruck camp after immigration to the US in her English-language memoir, *The Seamstress: A Memoir of Survival* (written for her by Louise Loots Thornton and published in 1997); Ruth Glasberg Gold's English language *Ruth's Journey: A Survivor's Memoir* (initially published in 1997) documenting the author's survival in Bershad, Transnistria where she was deported as an 11 year-old and witnessed the death of her family, her emigration to Israel, and later settlement in Miami, US; Sonya Palty's Romanian-language memoir *Evrei, Treceți Nistrul/Jews, Cross the Dniester River* written in Israel, after the author's emigration, and documenting her deportation to Bogdanovka where, as a medical assistant, she witnessed and documented other women's rapes and despair.

In order to fill this gap in scholarship, my essay focuses on a memoir of (post-)Holocaust and Communist displacements written by a Jewish woman of Romanian background. A writer and Professor of English and Women's Studies at Wayne State University, Anca Vlasopolos was born in Bucharest in 1948 in a multicultural family, the daughter of a Hungarian Greek father, Paul, and of a Jewish Romanian mother, Hermina (or Mimi). *No Return Address*, subtitled *A Memoir of Displacement*, recounts the trajectory of Anca Vlasopolos' family from Romania to a life of multiple displacements in Western Europe and the US. The story encompasses her mother's surviving Auschwitz and three other Nazi labor camps without losing hope in the forces of life. It relates her father's imprisonment in 1953 because of his antigovernment propaganda and his death in 1956. It points to daughter and mother's granted exile from Communist Romania in 1962 on condition they renounced their citizenship. It underscores their multiple subsequent transits from state to state between 1962 and 1963. Ultimately, it records their final arrival in the US, and settling in Detroit, where the unhappily remarried Hermina divorces in 1966 and makes a life of commitment to her daughter.

I argue that Vlasopolos' narrative maps her family's movement from Romania to the US via Western Europe by means of gendered intergenerational spaces of Holocaust and Communist traumas. First, there is the space of Holocaust traumas as experienced by Anca's mother, in which bonds between encamped women become instrumental for survival. Then, there is the space of Communist traumas as lived by both mother and daughter in Romania, in which women's relational existence takes up slightly different forms represented by acts of subversion against state impositions shared by women across ethnic and social lines and in the case of which the mediation of Holocaust memory through the experience of Communism takes center stage for the daughter. That happens because the author pertains to the postmemory generation, therefore her relation to Holocaust experiences is mediated by her personal experience of Communist repression

while growing up alongside her mother in Bucharest. Her direct knowledge of this other space of repression, less extreme but still scarring, becomes the main means for the daughter's access to the previous generation's traumas, bringing to the foreground the persistence of unresolved past issues into the present. Finally, one counts the more open space of the US, not without its constraints, yet the one place offering these women the possibility to work through lived and inherited traumatic experiences by their final access to unrestrained affective bonds of being.

My endeavor in this essay – that of identifying the coordinates of these various spaces of traumas in a woman's travel memoir – allows one to address a couple of important questions on gender, Holocaust and Communism representation and remembrance: what was the impact of living in post-Holocaust communist Romania on forming the memory of the Holocaust, Communism and gender? In what way did the US space as an immigration location reflect Jewish women's attempt to deal with their traumas? In the attempt to answer these questions, I contend that Vlasopolos' memoir shows the important role of women's testimonies and ability to live through traumas via bonding experiences, or what Holocaust historian Terrence Des Pres has identified as relational acts involving "some minimal fabric of care, some margin of giving and receiving, [which] is essential to life in extremity."⁴ Put differently, Des Pres considers that *bonds of affect* are not merely subsidiary to our survival instinct but they are essential, therefore instrumental in sustaining life in conditions of extremity. I am trying to trace the specifics of such "transpersonal" bonds in the case of women living through two successive traumatic situations, the Holocaust and Communism, and see how these bonds are reshaped beyond a traumatic grasp in a democratic environment like that of the US.⁵ My

⁴ Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Quokka Book/Pocket Books, 1978), 39.

⁵ I am using here literary historian Nancy K. Miller's term of "transpersonal" which captures an important part of the characteristics of bonds of

main contention is that in the case of extreme situations, women's bonding relies on the collectively built courage to police their bodies in subversive ways to that of the various official inscriptions in force during World War II and Communism. In contrast, in the case of democratic US, women can finally access forms of bonding unrestrained by state impositions and they may openly choose them on their own terms.

Women and the Holocaust Displacements

Born after the end of World War II, hence part of the postmemory generation, Anca Vlasopolos recounts the legacy of Holocaust times that her mother transmitted to her after being imprisoned for three months in Auschwitz.⁶ In depicting this, Vlasopolos' memoir employs a pattern characteristic of women's Holocaust autobiographies. In "Holocaust, American Style," Oren Baruch Stier has delineated the main feminine tropes of the Shoah as "gender assault," which was of more central concern to women than to men, and the experience of camp initiation which was more invasive and sexually traumatic for women as opposed

affect discussed in my essay, since Miller understands the "transpersonal zone" as a space made up of activities which "take shape in the connective tissue that binds together language, custom, practice, cultural memory, and the archive." Based on this, Miller defines "the transpersonal" as "a process through which the self moves into and out of the social, psychic and material spaces of relation," as a form of community developed with people to whom one can be related by filiation/descent but also by affinity/choice. See Nancy K. Miller, "Getting Transpersonal: The Cost of an Academic Life," *Prose Studies* 31, no. 3 (2009): 168.

⁶ *Postmemory* is a concept coined by Marianne Hirsch, to which I will refer later in the essay, to suggest that the connection to traumatic experiences on the part of Holocaust survivors' children does not happen following a remembrance of their own lived experiences but of representations that they have been told or passed on by their parents, based on children's sense of displacement and belatedness. See, for instance, Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

to men.⁷ As correlative themes, Sara R. Horowitz has identified the specifically female experiences of pregnancy and motherhood and women's attempt to keep their domestic duties under almost impossible conditions.⁸

Vlasopolos' travel memoir continues this tradition of women's Holocaust narratives and shows how "female sexuality and motherhood added burdens to the normative Holocaust ordeal."⁹ This is achieved thanks to two episodes about the abuse of sexuality and maternal responsibility undergirding Hermina's Auschwitz experience, which were told to the author only in her twenties. These two scenes show how Hermina managed to transform her familial role into the need to protect others, namely women prisoners during the Holocaust, and her own family, husband and daughter, in the aftermath.

In my view, given its above-delineated function of being a repository of the gendered space of Holocaust traumas, Vlasopolos' travel memoir significantly complements the academic research findings of Holocaust/memory studies scholar Marianne Hirsch. More or less coincidentally, Hirsch is not only of the same generation with Vlasopolos but shares a similar background and emigration trajectory. Born in 1949, in Timișoara, Romania, Hirsch is the daughter of Romanian Jews who escaped the Shoah. Her parents, Lotte and Carl Hirsch were native Czernowitzers who were interned in a Nazi ghetto but escaped deportation and hurriedly left their birth city, then under Soviet rule, with false papers, in 1945, and went to Romania.¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch spent her early years

⁷ Oren Baruch Stier, "Holocaust, American Style," *Prooftexts* 22, no. 3 (2002): 369. For more detailed insights in the same direction, see also Sonja Hedgepeth and Rachelle Saidel, eds., *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

⁸ Sara R. Horowitz, "Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory," *Prooftexts* 20, nos. 1-2 (2000): 175.

⁹ Lillian S. Kremer, *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 3.

¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "'We Would Not Have Come without You': Generations of Nostalgia," *American Imago* 59, no. 3 (2002):

in Timișoara and Bucharest before her family decided to leave Communist Romania for Austria, in 1961, thanks to “Certificates of Travel,” and finally settled in the United States.¹¹

Hirsch most clearly suggests the high stakes of gendered Holocaust agency and representation in an article jointly written with Leo Spitzer and entitled “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission.” The authors start from a project undertaken between 1942 and 1944 by women interned in the Terezín camp, that of reconstructing from memory and writing down the recipes of meals they had prepared in prewar times. The critics explain how this collective book of recipes cannot be helpful if one wants to cook, many of the ingredients or steps being amiss, but on a cultural level, it is a testament to “the will to survive and the determined commitment to community and collaboration that produced [it]...in the face of brutality and dehumanization.”¹² After identifying these aspects of gendered transfer, the critics join other Holocaust scholars in considering whether or not one should not hesitate in the attempt to use gender as an analytic category in relation to the Holocaust, since Nazis wanted to exterminate all Jews, irrespective of gender. Yet, Hirsch and Spitzer sustain that, far from being irrelevant, feminist approaches and readings of gender are fundamental at least as compensatory, reparatory gestures, since gender differences have always been there, even if oftentimes not visible. Most importantly, Hirsch and Spitzer suggest the need to reframe the discussion of gender in Holocaust studies beyond a simplistic and “too common polarity between erasing difference and exaggerating it to the point of celebrating the skills and qualities of women over those of men.”¹³

256. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), xvi.

¹¹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Memory and Post-memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 84, 220–228.

¹² Hirsch and Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects,” 355.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 357.

Albeit in a less academic form, that of a transatlantic memoir, Vlasopolos' recollections of her mother's Holocaust traumas as transmitted to herself follow a complementary path to that of Hirsch and Spitzer via the already-mentioned tropes of women's Holocaust writings, the abuse of sexuality and maternal responsibility. In Vlasopolos' book, the case of abuse of sexuality refers to a Jewish pregnant woman undetected by immediate overseers on arrival in the camp, except for one SS woman-commander who soon became aware of the woman's condition given her posture, but initially said nothing. Once the woman was in labor, however, this Nazi woman-commander consciously and sadistically killed the delivering woman and her new-born child since she "ordered the prisoner's legs tied together and stayed, her arms crossed, smiling, until the woman and child, struggling to sever themselves into life, became inextricably tied up in each other, until they both ceased to move."¹⁴ This episode underscores the complexity of women's attitudes during the Holocaust, the unexplainable complicity of some women and their perverse aggressiveness on a par with that of men. In that, just like Hirsch and Spitzer, Vlasopolos uses gendered lens beyond simplistic polarities that would merely attempt to rescale the location of power from the grasp of men to that of women.

The episode about maternal responsibility via women's bonds in the camp refers to a Jewish woman helped to give birth by the other barrack inmates who cover her cries of pain by their own loud laments in order to prevent the guards from finding out the truth. Most importantly, as a case of shared self-sacrifice in the name of helping the other and as an empowering and hopeful instance of subversion, they all accept the dire consequences awaiting them and see the healthy living newborn as at least a temporary victory of life against Nazi camp conditions even though they are immediately punished by camp commanders who, unable

¹⁴ Anca Vlasopolos, *No Return Address: A Memoir of Displacement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 81.

to search for recent birth signs among the thousands of women prisoners, “had all the women file out and spend three hours on their knees in the frozen mud of early dawn.”¹⁵

Thanks to the above episodes from Vlasopolos’ memoir, one can extend Hirsch and Spitzer’s interpretation of the Terezín book of recipes to women’s relational existence via their sense of helping each other especially in point of their status as birth-givers in Auschwitz. If the book of prewar recipes translated endangered Jewish women’s desire to preserve something of their previous lives and to acknowledge the value they could transmit as women in point of food preparation, Vlasopolos’ episode about a Jewish woman’s birth in the camps further suggests women’s desire to preserve their motherly status under extreme conditions and recognize a further fundamental value they shared as women – the ability to give new life, regardless of the surrounding conditions. Preserving belief in the ability to give birth was the utmost subversive and hope-instilling gesture on the part of Jewish women in Auschwitz, since a central element of the Nazi racial doctrines at the time was the destruction of Jewish mothers. As Lillian Kremer indicates, “the gestating Jewish mother posed a greater threat than any fighting man” in Nazi ideology given her reproductive capability of bringing to life the “undesirable race.”¹⁶

Most poignantly, Vlasopolos’ memoir records the mother’s persistent sense of these gendered Holocaust traumas in post-Holocaust times. After settling in Detroit in 1963, the mother’s attempt to participate in the city’s project for a Holocaust Memorial is soon dismantled by the organizers’ “hollow talk and self-aggrandizing” to the detriment of their goal, that of putting together videotapes of survivors’ testimonies.¹⁷ As a consequence, what Hermina transmits to her daughter is her aversion to the patriarchal haul of Holocaust discourse, and the limited use of people’s suffering

¹⁵ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶ Kremer, *Women’s Holocaust Writing*, 2.

¹⁷ Vlasopolos, *No Return Address*, 80.

for organizers' own benefit, while refusing to equally consider the case of Jewish guilt and complicity that had also been characteristic of the catastrophe. As proof of this, we learn that at the Detroit meeting of survivors and their children, to which Hermina and Anca participated, "people were invited to speak, and the women were systematically silenced, not only by male fellow sufferers but by wealthy younger men who took over because they were donating the money. To cap the evening, the rabbi invited everyone to have coffee and cake made and served by women survivors."¹⁸ This scene records the obvious flaws of early Holocaust remembrance, which subordinated the incommensurability of one's Shoah experience to the primacy of material interests, relegating the need to remember the position of a mere economic transaction. Meanwhile, women were subordinated to the position of passive, quiet domestic servants.

It is this very patronizing and condescending patriarchal post-Holocaust attitude that triggers Hermina's need to draw her daughter's and others' attention to the complicity of some Jews, on asserting, "You saw them. It's as if nothing at all happened to them. They're unchanged."¹⁹ She subsequently condemns certain Jews' attitudes on the trains to concentration camps as close to Nazis' attitude, ready to stifle children's voices in the name of their own survival and without due respect to the others' equally terrible condition: "That's how they were on the trains too. Shut the children up, they'd tell the mothers. Well, the Nazis shut them up for them. That's why I couldn't live in Israel – the cumulative effect of those people unchanged even by hell...."²⁰ Consequently, when the Project sends a new interviewer to Hermina, since in the audiotapes she talked about Nazi crimes, in the videotape she decides to talk about "Jewish collaboration with the Germans in the pre-camp ghettos of Transylvania and in the camps themselves."²¹ In front of this unexpected situation, the woman

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

interviewer leaves and never returns, while only the mother's audiotape dealing with Nazi crimes is included in the Memorial. Her other testimony, not corresponding to the organizers' agenda and their sanitized non-problematizing view of the Holocaust, is silenced. In contradistinction to such patriarchal and largely economic-vested manipulations of Shoah images via categorical binary terms, Hermina transmits to her daughter the above stories of women's experiences, drawing on the "excess of sorrow that will not respect containment."²² Put differently, the daughter learns about the necessity to fight institutional or individual attempts to reduce the Holocaust to one or another agenda, usually running on the lines of patriarchal or economic interests. Similarly to the ideas suggested by Hirsch and Spitzer, this does not happen from a mere interest to undermine male authority and replace it with women's equally authoritarian and agenda-gear'd discourse. Instead, the mother teaches her daughter to have a critical perspective on Holocaust memories and their uses rather than join different organizations' self-centered agendas. This perspective acknowledges one's own and others' limitations in understanding and transmitting the full complexity of the shattering experiences of World War II and also capitalizes on the important role of women's bonding in the camps as their shared and at the same time fragile subversive form of survival. Nevertheless, Vlasopolos' narrative belongs to a daughter born after the end of the Shoah. In her case, the child-daughter's perspective is also introduced into discussion and, as such, it offers new vistas of analysis.

Jewish Women and Communist Displacements

First of all, Anca Vlasopolos clarifies the fact that her memoir is not geared by the leitmotifs of food and hunger, as was the case of Holocaust victims, irrespective of their gender, and which must have determined her mother's subsequent attitude which I have analyzed above. Instead, her travel memoir is constructed around

²² Ibid., 81.

the constraints on food and free speech, the main coordinates of Communist victims' existence, which Anca knew first hand. Therefore, after delineating the gendered space of Holocaust traumas that her mother has transmitted to her, the author goes on to describe the gendered space of Communist traumas which she came to know directly and which continued to accumulate new painful experiences in the case of her mother.

The first five chapters of the book map the general contours of life under Communism for the average citizens of Romania, hence suggesting that the memoir is not merely a personal recollection but serves as a case of "transpersonal" witnessing. Chapter 1, "Mouthfuls," records the problem of food scarcity in Communist Romania, its effects on people who come to see food as not merely a taken-for-granted aspect of life outside the realm of emotional involvement but a powerful object of desire and emotional implication. Chapter 2, "Gatekeepers," constructs an image of Bucharest citizens' everyday life under permanent threat of surveillance by Securitate (The Romanian Secret Services) informers, such as their own building porter, Ion. Chapters 3 and 4, "Out of the Mouth" and "The Vocabulary of Faith," refer to people's internalized fear and tendency to keep silent about religion before the others in order to avoid punishment if one of the interlocutors might have been an informer. They interweave Communists' institutionalized back-grounding of religious faith with the mother's decision to keep silent about Anca's religion and ethnicity as a Jew in the face of "a hostile culture" in which "Christians hate Jews" and disdainfully call them "kikes."²³ In that context, Anca only learns she is Jewish at 5 years old, from her playground friend, Benny, and the mother's lessons from Auschwitz stories soon follow, accompanied by the parent's bitter remark that "[p]eople are contradictory."²⁴ Chapter 5, "Mud Miracles," serves as an explanation for the mother's stance, recording the high level of official discrimination against Romania's minority groups and the ensuing strains for these various communities.

²³ Ibid., 29.

²⁴ Ibid., 24.

Especially thanks to this fifth chapter, we can see how Communist experiences serve a mediatory function to understanding and complementing Holocaust experiences, following Vlasopolos' note that "[w]e too, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Turks, wanderers brought by triumphant empires or diasporas and abandoned on this hostile shore – people who dearly bought savoir faire, oiled the wheels of commerce, kept cottage industries alive...found ourselves deprived of the very rootlessness that had made us Other, immured inside the boundaries of a country that would let us neither out nor in."²⁵ Here, the author suggests that the discrimination she and her family experienced in Communist times comprised the state's gradual implementation of Romanian nationalism, an ideology that historian Alexandru Florian explains as the belief that "everything Romanian was good, while the origin of evil was always from outside." According to "this preconception risen to the rank of a 'theory' of history," Romania's ethnic groups were ignored through omission and implicitly humiliated, an idea also resurfacing from Vlasopolos' above-cited text.²⁶ Triggered by the vanishing of a Turkish pastry-shop because of Communists' gradual implementation of the nationalization of economic ventures, the author implicitly refers to the economic advantage Romania took of its minorities in order to build its industry at various moments in history. During the Holocaust, the Romanization of employment came to pass, meaning that only Romanians could own companies or be employed.²⁷ In Communist times, official discriminatory actions comprised policies that excluded minorities from the country's economic machine by outlawing private economic ventures, all of them becoming state-owned, and

²⁵ Ibid., 48-49.

²⁶ Florian, "The Perception of the Holocaust in Historiography and in the Romanian Media," 19.

²⁷ For more details, see Ștefan Ionescu, "Implementing the Romanisation of Employment in 1941 Bucharest: Bureaucratic and Economic Sabotage of the 'Aryanisation' of the Romanian Economy," *Holocaust Studies* 16, nos.1-2 (2010): 39-64.

especially bringing down the entrepreneurial individuals among the country's minorities. Importantly, the author notes how these others used this traumatic aspect of their existence as grounds for connective being across ethnic lines, or what she calls others who "drew together in a kind of huddle of the prideful wounded."²⁸

Just as in the case of the Holocaust, Vlasopolos' text does not stop at generalized broad comments but again focuses on the important input of gendered experiences under Romania's Communist regime. Thus, Anca's mother had been advised by Communists to divorce her husband once he was imprisoned, but she refused. In order not to denounce Hermina, Anca understood that "some sexual bartering" had been part of the exchange, hence the mother would only refer to her boss as "that vile man."²⁹ Simultaneously, Anca notes how "I'd heard from my mother and her women friends all sorts of stories of how they had foiled attempted assaults and rapes – in the office storeroom [from the Film Distribution Office], in the dark of the screening room as they translated for the censorship committee, on the trains back from concentration camps, even on our building's elevators."³⁰ Vlasopolos' text which places women from Communist Romania as potential rape victims across ethnic lines invites comparison with Miriam Katin's Holocaust visual memoir in which the victim versus perpetrator dichotomy is complicated at the end of World War II by the equally barbarous behavior of the Jews' liberators, Russian Communist soldiers looting the Hungarian countryside and raping women, including two year-old Miriam's mother. Vlasopolos' kindred scenes of women's sexual abuse starting with their return back from concentration camps manage to open up the discussion of complexity in point of gender roles and ethnic patterns in autocratic regimes. They suggest the prolonged pangs of Holocaust women-survivors in the newly created Communist regimes of Eastern Europe where they had to face the delicate

²⁸ Vlasopolos, *No Return Address*, 41.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

problem of rehabilitation and difficulty to return to normal life. As women, they faced a double discrimination – the persistent prejudice running on ethnic lines, explaining Hermina's decision to keep silent about Anca's Jewish identity, and their precarious existence functioning on gender lines, as women of no matter what ethnic group, who were placed under the constant threat of abuse from power-holding men.

In such a discriminatory society, a vertical sense of morality represented by one's decision to honestly speak up one's mind irrespective of consequences can hardly function as a basic principle of life for average individuals. Instead, just as in the case of the extreme conditions from Auschwitz, moral values are continually negotiated in view of survival. As already noted, the result is that Anca learns from these tried women the ambiguity of morality in autocracies, the need to negotiate integrity and survival. To this amounts the mother's fear on her husband's telling her that at a queue he openly expressed his joy for the Minister of Education's death; Hermina is afraid lest he should be jailed again if one of those present was an informer. As a result, the mother uses a propaganda-informed understanding of morality on Anca, when the girl plays outside with other kids, throwing slingshots at passers-by. The mother reminds her of a sixteen year old boy condemned to half-a-year imprisonment for fooling around with a slingshot and knocking off the nose of Stalin's statue from the park. The mother then asks, "Do you have any idea what you're doing? You're destroying state property?...and I gasped, recognizing the slogan that got people condemned without trial. I nodded. I shed a few tears of repentance. I've never held a slingshot in my hand since that evening."³¹ The mother's poignant warning here triggers the girl's internalization of the need to temporarily suppress a fearless, honest compass generally associated with normal childhood existence and function instead by a skewed moral logic in order to stay alive.

³¹ Ibid., 13.

Just as in Auschwitz, when a Jewish woman's successful birth in the camp thanks to women's bonding could suggest women's desire to preserve their motherly status under extreme conditions and sustain their fundamental role as life-givers, no matter the surrounding conditions, in Communist Romania, Anca's mother needs to use a subversive sense of being to be able to go on. Once her husband is imprisoned, she lies to her daughter that he is in Herculane, a Romanian health resort which was also the place where she and her husband spent their honeymoon around 1948. Anca tries to explain to herself the reason why her mother needed to tell this lie, just as she later lied again when her husband died. She notes, "while my father's bones rotted in the damp prison cell, while his flesh decomposed beneath the earth, my mother effected his cure and then his resurrection by transporting him where they had briefly escaped history."³² This scene largely resembles an episode from Primo Levi's memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* when after a rainy 1944 November day in which Primo and other inmates have to dig the soil in a muddy environment, he realizes that one of the latest arrivals, Hungarian Kraus Páli, still innocently believes that honest hard work can help one earn a good living, just as it would be normal in an employment office outside the camps. Moved by Kraus still preserving an honesty-informed humanity, Primo unexplainably decides to lie to him about a non-existent dream of comfort in order to preserve Kraus, and at least fleetingly, his own humanity via the limited escapism of a non-real situation.³³ He therefore tells Kraus how he dreamt that the Hungarian was visiting him at his parents' house in Italy and Primo "gave him food and drink, and a good bed to sleep in, and it was night time, but there was a wonderful warmth so that we were all dry in a moment (yes,

³² Ibid., 12-13.

³³ Levi becomes aware of Kraus's humanity as still untouched by the camp realities on perceiving the latter's eyes behind rain-soaked glasses, and noting "they are the eyes of the man Kraus" in Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 134.

I was also very wet).”³⁴ In similar terms, Hermina needs the passage from the palpable to the imaginary in the context of Communist Romania’s absurd logic of existence. The realm of imagination, even if itself a limited form of escapism, becomes a cherished necessary pleasant moment allowing one to temporarily forget of daily troubles. It is equally needed in order to keep one alive. Hence, when Anca is once again told the same story on her father’s death because of cardiac failure, though knowing the truth, she cherishes “this complicity of silence” because it offers her the freedom “to fantasize about my father’s eternal return. In fact, everything surrounding his death seemed so shrouded in mystery that when the news spread that my mother and I were to leave for America, many children and not a few grown-ups in the neighborhood were convinced that we were going to my father, who had somehow escaped over the border five years earlier.”³⁵ In other words, as long as mother and daughter live under Communism in Romania, Anca’s Holocaust-surviving mother tries to offer her daughter the only type of freedom that is possible for a woman living in a repressive society – this is the freedom of imagining a different reality subversive of the one policed by the authorities.

However, as a result of increasingly degrading experiences, the mother realizes that rehabilitation and return to meaningful life are impossible in an autocratic regime. In 1958, she decides to leave Romania and does everything to be granted permission to go so as to offer some chances of normal life to her daughter, finally emigrating in 1962. At bottom, Hermina wants to save her daughter from an imminent future that is soon to come – one in which women’s bodies would be strictly policed. This is the “Ceaușescu regime under whose surveillance my urine would be examined for evidence of pregnancy monthly, my most intimate functions becoming duties of the state; my mind would be a negligible defect to be corrected

³⁴ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 134.

³⁵ Vlasopolos, *No Return Address*, 33.

and possibly erased.”³⁶ Mother’s forebodings foreshadow Decree 770 issued by Romanian president Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1966 which outlawed abortion and the use of contraceptives in an effort to reverse the country’s low birth rates. Hence, the bodies and lives of women from Romania became not only at the mercy of patriarchal views but state-controlled and regulated. Till the 1989 revolution which marked the end of Communism in Romania, women’s fertility was placed under the state’s strict surveillance, with women taken to mandatory medical examinations every 1-3 months for detection of pregnancy and avoidance of getting an illegal abortion.³⁷ Hermina’s anticipating courageous response to this gender politics of Communist Romania, with women’s bodies under permanent checking and control, is the decision to emigrate. Meanwhile, the continuities of women’s lot from the unknown situation of the Holocaust shared by Jewish camp inmates to the lived reality of Communism targeting women of various ethnic groups, in which relational existence alone could represent a bulwark against official policies of corrupting intimate human relationships, offer Anca precious insight into the highly gendered costs of autocratic regimes, and of possible ways out, via women’s interplay between familial and affiliative forms of “transpersonal” being in their subversive policing of their bodies as acts of solidarity.

³⁶ Ibid., 205.

³⁷ In a 2008 review of Cristian Mungiu’s film about women’s condition in Communist Romania, *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*, Ioana Uricaru elaborates on communists’ post-1966 policy of mandatory periodical gynecological examinations to prevent abortions; see Ioana Uricaru, “*4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days: The Corruption of Intimacy*,” *Film Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 17. More recently, these features have been brought to public attention by the fall 2012 exhibition, *Cei din lume fără nume. Politica Pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușescu (Being Nameless in the World: The Ceaușescu Regime Pro-Life Politics)*. Organized by Corina Doboș and Florin S. Soare from the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (<http://politicapronatalista.iiccr.ro/>). See, in particular, Florin S. Soare’s comments on the effects of Decree 770 from the exhibition catalogue (http://politicapronatalista.iiccr.ro/pdf/binder1_low.pdf, 5-7).

A Way Out: Women's Affiliative Gaze and the Legacy of Displacement in US Society

Migration to America in the 1960s is described by Anca Vlasopolos as a liberating trip in point of gender lines, in the sense of women's finally being able to rely on relational existence not as a subversive policing of their bodies in response to discriminatory state impositions but as their own free choice beyond any impositions. Most relevantly, Anca Vlasopolos identifies the same characteristics of life as the other woman-author-critic coming from Romania to the US I have already mentioned. In her own memoir, *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch identifies "displacement" and "affiliative looks" on which friendships are based as coordinating aspects of her identity and she goes on to assert that in America she continues to feel at home in the presence of friends who allow her to remain in a liminal place, to both acculturate and not. As a result, in the US, Hirsch's family album is expanded to include school, camps, graduations, get-togethers with friends that were vital for her well-being. She calls these "affiliative looks [that] displace and familiarize the alienating gazes of unfamiliar cultural institutions. But the familial screen is displaced by the centrality of friendship."³⁸ In similar terms, Vlasopolos points out to a kindred paramount characteristic of her immigrant woman's life in the US – the legacy of displacement (or uprootedness) and affiliative connections to friends. She writes: "My uprootedness had kept me from becoming too securely anchored to happiness or success; yet webs of friendship, like nets stretched over the sawdust under trapezes where acrobats perform their flights, have let me bounce gently when I fall, have buoyed me so I could somersault and land on my feet and bow smiling."³⁹

The positive outcome of this acknowledgment of displacement and affiliation as fundamental elements of one's constitution is the ability to accept one's fractured and self-contradictory identity but also to suggest the value of relational being for women's

³⁸ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 234.

³⁹ Vlasopolos, *No Return Address*, 197.

emancipation and for instilling social change in a democratic society. Hirsch best explains this at the end of her memoir:

My history of multiple displacements has prepared me to conceive of identity as fractured and self-contradictory, as inflected by nationality, ethnicity, class, race, and history. But it has also made me appreciate those moments of commonality which allow for the adoption of a voice on behalf of women and for the commitment to social change.⁴⁰

Anca Vlasopolos' transatlantic memoir draws a similar map of multiple geographical and other displacements that place Jewish women's identity in the border area of shifting spaces between trauma persistence and working-through. This liminal position allows them to develop a strategy of both assimilation and resistance as basis of life in a democratic society. To this amounts the hole made by her mother in a photo of herself and her second husband, about which the author writes:

After my mother's death, underneath a pile of carefully sorted health insurance bills, I found a wedding picture of her, with her cousin from Brussels and a few Romanian friends, and with the figure of my stepfather carefully clipped, so that my mother stands smiling, incredibly youthful at forty-four, alone, on the steps of the City Hall, with a group of smiling people behind her and a hole to her left to be filled by whatever background might lie behind the picture, anything but the image of her temporary husband.⁴¹

After having lived through several traumas, once getting to the West, Hermina had thought she was marrying a man that would ensure security for her daughter, but only found out he was a "grey-ing adolescent, emotionally incapable of taking care of himself, let alone of accepting the responsibilities of parenthood."⁴² Within a month, their marriage proved a failure and soon they divorced. Hermina's decision to remove this fleeting husband from her

⁴⁰ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 238.

⁴¹ Vlasopolos, *No Return Address*, 130.

⁴² Ibid.

wedding photo while smiling unites the rest of the people therein is clear proof of these migrant Jewish women's finally being able to openly embrace a Hirsch-like "affiliative gaze that displaces, however tenuously, conventional institutional gazes" and opens up the full values of women's relational being for emancipation and social change, only available as such in a democratic society.⁴³

All in all, the theoretical insights behind my analysis of Vlasopolos memoir refer to the fundamental role of a gendered lens interspersing (post)memories of the Holocaust with memories of Communism in view of configuring and understanding cultural spaces. More precisely, my project contributes to existent scholarship by investigating Jewish women's generational flow of memory and trauma from one geographical and historical space to another, from Auschwitz during the Holocaust, to Bucharest in Communist times, to the US from the 1960s onwards. Vlasopolos memoir records the impact of living in post-Holocaust communist Romania on forming the memory of the Holocaust, Communism and gender. This refers to women's need to subversively police their bodies via shared bonds of affect that expand from primarily familial/decent-based configurations during the Holocaust towards an emergent inclusion of affiliative structures under Communism. During the Holocaust, preserving belief in the ability to give birth was the utmost subversive and hope-instilling gesture on the part of Jewish women, explaining their decision to help those pregnant to give birth and keep that secret from camp overseers; in Communist times, women's decision to control their bodies, and fight state-imposed abortions and sexual abuses, becomes an equally powerful and dangerous subversive gesture that unites them across ethnic lines. It is only after reaching the democratic space of the US that women like Anca and her mother manage to develop the full potential of affiliative structures of relation, forms which can begin to comprehensively flourish only in a social context that involves the absence of highly intrusive state-imposed limitations.

⁴³ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 240.

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From Private to Public Memories: Vilna Ghetto Female Prisoners and their Resistance in Documentary and Narrative Films

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Film could be seen as one of the most powerful and popular mediums through which a specific narrative can be transmitted and collective memories of various social groups can be shaped. Therefore, the representation of Jewish women's memories in Holocaust documentary and narrative films is a way to find missing narratives in the Lithuanian history of the Holocaust. Firstly, Holocaust films create "transferential spaces, in which people are invited to enter into experiential relationships with events which they themselves did not live through" and, in this manner, they gain access to different sorts of knowledge, including the subjective knowledge(s) of history.¹ Secondly, Holocaust cinema is not only a "transmitter of historical trauma" but also "a form of posttraumatic historical memory," namely, film not only presents historical events but also "attempts to embody and reproduces the trauma for the spectator through its form of narration," and might serve as a therapeutic treatment for both the audience and the narrator.²

¹ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 113.

² Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), xi, 3.

In this paper, the possibilities and limits that cinema represent for the Holocaust witnesses to publicly remember will be analyzed. The focus lies on three female Vilna Ghetto prisoners and the paths their lives take during and after the Holocaust. All these women, during the Second World War, were engaged in the Jewish armed or spiritual resistance in the Vilna Ghetto: Fania Brantsovskaya and Vitka Kempner-Kovner were partisans, and the ghetto singer Liuba Levitska was one of the most important figures of the spiritual resistance. The memories of these three women became the objects of several documentary and narrative films.

In the first section of this article I will reveal how documentary filmmaking gave a voice to female Jewish partisans, who, along with their male compatriots, actively fought in the woods during the Holocaust in Lithuania. In the postwar years, most of the female Jewish partisans have chosen to remain silent about their activities in the resistance. After many years, in their advanced age, these women decided to remember again. However, neither Fania Brantsovskaya nor Vitka Kempner-Kovner have written memoirs, they have chosen film as a medium of testifying and making their memories publicly legitimate.

In the second section of this paper, the cinematic possibilities to represent private memories publicly will be questioned. Consequently, the limits of narrative feature films will be observed. The analysis of the first Lithuanian narrative film *Ghetto* will reveal that in some cases private and public spaces of remembering do not coincide.³ The film *Ghetto* will reveal how the private memories of a famous Jewish opera singer Liuba Levitska were reinvented by the filmmakers. A ghetto singer became not only the protagonist of the spiritual resistance, but also was turned into an active partisan fighter and was involved in a passionate relationship with a NS officer. Such an appropriation of private memories will raise questions about the borders of representing

³ *Ghetto*, dir. by Audrius Juzėnas (Sony Pictures Germany, 2006), DVD.

the Holocaust in cinema. It will also show what kind of different societal functions documentary and narrative films have while representing Holocaust memory.

Testimonies of Jewish Female Partisans in Documentary Cinema: Jewish Women Publicly Remember Resistance in Lithuania

In the following, I will discuss how private memories of the former Jewish partisans from the Vilna Ghetto – Fania Brantsovskaya and Vitka Kempner-Kovner – became public through their testimonies in documentary films. Their memories are revealed along with those of the famous FPO leaders Abba Kovner and Yitzhak Wittenberg: Jewish women who took an active role in the armed resistance.⁴ Two female partisans with different post-Holocaust destinies have been chosen. Brantsovskaya, after the Second World War, married a fellow former partisan and remained in Soviet Lithuania, where she, until Lithuanian independence, has never spoken about her activities in the Jewish resistance. Kempner-Kovner, who in contrast to Brantsovskaya was a Zionist, after the war moved to live to Israel, where she also married a former partisan Abba Kovner. However, even though they lived in completely different postwar societies, especially, in its relation with the Holocaust remembrance, both of them, for many years, were silent about their experiences in the woods. Thus, here, I will observe how these women use a medium of documentary film to retell their memories and inscribe into the public discourse the female role in the Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.

⁴ FPO (The Fareynikte Partizaner Organizatsye) is a Jewish resistance organization who organized armed resistance against the Nazis in the Vilna Ghetto during the Second World War. It was formed in January, 1942 in the Vilna Ghetto and was comprised of Zionist and Communist partisans.

In Lithuania, for many years, female Jewish partisans were invisible in the Jewish resistance narrative. In Soviet Lithuania, female Jewish partisans have not voiced their stories neither in books, nor in films, although most of them were acknowledged by the Soviet authorities as “Heroes of War.” The resistance narrative, which was ideologically constructed by the Soviet authorities, was dominated by the male partisans, who wrote books and retold their stories of resistance during the Second World War.⁵ Thus during Soviet times, when the memory of the Holocaust in Lithuania was marginalized, female partisans had to overcome two hurdles: as being Jewish victims of the Holocaust and, secondly, as women.

Female partisans started to come out publicly only after the Lithuanian independence in 1990. Firstly, two autobiographical books appeared, one written by the female partisan from Kovno Sara Ginaitė-Rubinson, now living in Canada, and another, written by Vilna partisan Rachel Margolis, today residing in Israel. These textual memories were enriched by documentary films about Jewish resistance. The main protagonist of most of these documentary films was Fania Brantsovskaya, a former Vilna partisan from the partisan group led by famous FPO chief commander Abba Kovner. Fania Brantsovskaya after the war, as many other partisans, was awarded the “Medal for Partisan of the Great Patriotic War,” she was even invited to Moscow for the celebration of Victory Day in 1945. She remembers about her trip: “in summer 1945 Mikhail and I were in the Lithuanian delegation standing on the Red Square at the Victory Parade. These were

⁵ Mejeris Elinas and Dimitrijus Gelpernas, *Kaunas getas ir jo kovotojai* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1969); Povilas Štaras, *Partizaninis judėjimas Lietuvoje didžiojo tėvynės karo metais* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1966); Povilas Štaras, *Drąsios širdys* (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokslinės literatūros leidykla, 1958); M. Kurganovas, *Mirties akivaizdoje* (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokslinės literatūros leidykla, 1960); Mejeris Elinas, *Mirties fortuose* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1966); Mejeris Elinas, *Kraujas ir ginklai* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1970).

unforgettable moments.”⁶ Later she finished economics, then worked as statistical analyst at the Central Statistical Department of the Soviet Lithuania and devoted her time to family and work; however, the memories of the past have not become the central part of her public life. Only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Brantsovskaya started to remember her past. Today she guides tourist groups through Jewish Vilna and Ponar Forest, where most of the Lithuanian Jews were executed.

She appeared in numerous documentary films and became a professional Lithuanian Holocaust witness. Brantsovskaya is one of the few Holocaust survivors who still lives in Lithuania. Therefore, it is not surprising that as a former partisan she has become the central and symbolic figure of the remembrance. She is also a keynote speaker during many Jewish and Holocaust commemoration events in Lithuania. Brantsovskaya, firstly, appeared in the documentary film *Surviving Ostland* (in Fig. 1 and 2), which was created in collaboration with the Anne Frank House and the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, and is shown together with the exhibition in the Jewish Museum in Vilnius.⁷ She also served as a Holocaust witness in documentary films created by the Lithuanian National Broadcaster *The Contemporaries* and recently *Fania's Vilnius* where she speaks about the importance of resistance in her life.⁸

In her testimonies Brantsovskaya tries to neglect the unfair devaluation of their organizational activities in the forests. As Renee Poznanski, who wrote about the French underground Jewish resistance, notices “even though women were often given the most dangerous missions of transporting weapons and guns, what they were doing was defined as helping those who blew up

⁶ She refers to her husband. Zhanna Litinskaya, “Interview with Fania Brantsovskaya,” *Centropa* (2005). <http://www.centropa.org/search/site/fania>.

⁷ *Surviving Ostland*, dir. by Sepp Brudermann and Niko Mayr, 2002.

⁸ *The Contemporaries* (Amžininkai), dir. by Rimas Bružas, 2008. *Fania's Vilnius*, dir. by Edita Mildažytė, 2013.

the trains.”⁹ Fania Brantsovskaya focuses in her war memories on her active participation in the resistance. She recalls that, firstly, she was given a rifle and then an automatic gun, which she used in military missions.¹⁰ Moreover, in her testimonies in both, film and articles, she speaks about her wish for revenge. Brantsovskaya remembers that she along with other female partisans “blasted trains and placed explosives in the enemy’s equipment. We shot and killed them. Yes, I did, I killed them and did so with ease. I knew that my dear ones were dead and I took revenge for them and thousands others with each and every shot.”¹¹ In the documentary film *Surviving Ostland*, Brantsovskaya remembers her days as the partisan of the FPO and also remembers her wish for revenge, she says: “I was hungry for revenge. I already knew that my family was gone” (in Fig. 1). During the Holocaust her entire family was killed and, thus, partisan fighting became the only way to survive not only the Holocaust but also the loss of her relatives.

Her memories have not only broken the silence of the Jewish partisans in Lithuania, but they also have challenged male-based narration of heroism. Partisan women, for many years, were excluded from the “institutional structure of recognition and remembrance that emerged after the war” as female activities during the partisan warfare were defined as private acts and not, as in case of male partisans, examples of national heroism.¹² Through telling their life stories publicly, Brantsovskaya and other Lithuanian-Jewish female partisans, revealed that women were both, taking active part not only in different non-armed resistance activities but also in the armed resistance.

⁹ Lenore J. Weitzman, “Living on the Aryan Side in Poland: Gender, Passing, and the Nature of Resistance,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 218.

¹⁰ Zhanna Litinskaya, “Interview with Fania Brantsovskaya.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lenore J. Weitzman, “Living on the Aryan Side in Poland,” 218.

Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the reception of Brantsovskaya's memory in the Lithuanian media was very ambivalent. The documentary film *The Contemporaries* caused a very negative discussion. This documentary film discussed the Holocaust in Lithuania, and was shown on the national broadcaster LRT on the 26th of January in 2008.¹³ Most of the protagonists of this film were Lithuanian historians, however, several Holocaust witnesses were also invited, among them Fania Brantsovskaya. In this film she spoke just several minutes and actually has not retold very profoundly her partisan activities, as in the documentary film *Surviving Ostland*. Nevertheless, after the screening of this film, the Lithuanian media also drew attention to the memoirs of other Jewish partisans. Lithuanian newspaper *Lietuvos Aidas* on the 29 January 2008 published an article which urged a revision of Holocaust history and its victims in Lithuania. This article not only questioned the appearance of Fania Brantsovskaya in the documentary film but also focused on the memoirs of other Jewish partisans:

Perhaps the most shocking part in this film was an interview in Russian with Fania Brantsovsky. Exactly 64 years ago, on the night from January 29 to 30, Soviet terrorists murdered all the inhabitants of the Kaniūkai village and burned down the village.... By the way, in all the memoirs written by participants in the Soviet terrorist actions in Lithuania, only R. Margolis acknowledges the fact that it was a shame for her that the members of her squad would take not only animals and food from the peasants, but also their clothes, watches and money.... Specifically in this book we discover that the above mentioned Fania Brantsovsky was among the murderers of the Kaniūkai villagers destroying the village.¹⁴

¹³ The film *Surviving Ostland* was not screened on any Lithuanian TV, and attracted no media attention, although today it is shown at the exhibition in the Green House.

¹⁴ Irena Tumavičiūtė, "Berniukas iš Varšuvos geto ir lietuviškas 'Požiūris,'" *Lietuvos Aidas* 24, January 29, 2008 (translated by Dovid Katz); *Lietuvos rytas* and *Respublika* focused mostly on the case of Arad, and also did not comment on this film.

Thus this article defined Jewish partisans as “the Soviet terrorists.” It is interesting to notice that most of these Jewish female partisans, including Brantsovskaya, in 2004 were awarded a hero’s medal for their activities as anti-Nazi partisans by the Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas.¹⁵ This article was not left unnoticed and after four months was followed by the prosecution process which was initiated by the Lithuanian Prosecutor General. It investigated the case of Kaniūkai where several female partisans had to be questioned for their possible participation in the killing of civilians during the war.¹⁶ After several years this case was closed. However, this investigation also attracted the attention of various international media outlets; for instance, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Gordon Brown wrote an article in 2011, which was published in *The Independent*. He defended Jewish partisans, blaming the Lithuanian state for the anti-Semitic campaign against the Holocaust victims, and revealing local press hostility towards the Jewish history of the country.¹⁷

Why was the reception of female partisan memories so negative in the beginning in the Lithuanian media? The “wrong” political affiliation during the Soviet times could be named as one of the main explanations. All these female partisans, including Brantsovskaya, were named as “Heroes of War” after the Second World War. However, in Lithuania, the winners of the Second World War are seen as the occupiers of the country. In the Lithuanian historical narrative the end of war marks not the victory, on the contrary, it is the official beginning of the Lithuanian occupation by Soviet Russia. It means that all the pro-Soviet heroes

¹⁵ Rachel Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 504.

¹⁶ The Kaniūkai massacre was an execution of civilians carried out by the Soviet partisans on January 29, 1944.

¹⁷ Gordon Brown, “Women of Courage: Rachel Margolis,” *The Independent* (2011).

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/women-of-courage-rachel-margolis-2236081.html>

in the Lithuanian historical context are seen anti-heroes which collaborated with the Soviets and welcomed the occupation. As Leiserowitz notices “the group pictures of the veterans and their appearances at anniversary event were component of a collective memory in the LiSSR and were looked on by the Lithuanians as an expression of the Soviet culture of occupation.”¹⁸ This memory of cultural occupation has not disappeared after independence and today it also influences the remembrance of the Holocaust and its victims.

However, already in 2013, Edita Mildažytė, journalist of LRT, created a documentary film *Fania's Vilnius*, where Brantsovskaya walks across the streets of Jewish Vilna and remembers her life and fate of her relatives. This film was also shown on the Lithuanian National Broadcaster during the commemoration of the 80th Anniversary of the Liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto. In the film, Brantsovskaya as well contemplates her partisan activities and visits bunkers in the Ponar forest, where Jewish partisans used to hide. This film was shown not only in the Lithuanian National Broadcaster but also in the Lithuanian Parliament during the 4th Litvak Congress. In contrast to the documentary film *The Contemporaries*, *Fania's Vilnius* has not evoked any negative reactions about Jewish partisans in the Lithuanian media. The choice of Fania as the protagonist of the film reveals both the changed media reception to Brantsovskaya's witnessing and an ongoing transition in the Lithuanian society and political environment in the perception of the Jewish resistance during the Second World War. The private memories of Fania through documentary films are being inscribed in the Lithuanian media memory of the Holocaust. Her story of a Jewish woman as a partisan becomes visualized and narrated in Lithuania.

¹⁸ Ruth Leiserowitz, “In the Lithuanian Woods: Jewish and Lithuanian Female Partisans,” in *Women and Men at War: A Gender Perspective on World War II and its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Maren Röger and Ruth Leiserowitz (Osnabrück: Fibre, 2012), 217.

Fig. 1. Fania Brantsovskaya remembers her wish for revenge



Fig. 2. Fania Brantsovskaya standing next to the partisan bunker



Source: *Surviving Ostland* (LT/NL 2002, Directors: Sepp Brudermann and Niko Mayr)

Fig. 3. Interview with Vitka Kempner-Kovner



Source: *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans* (USA 2001, Director: Seth Kramer)

Fig. 4. Vitka Kempner-Kovner remembers herself as an active Jewish partisan



Source: *I Am Talking Now: Memoirs of a Partisan Woman* (Israel 2011, Director: Yael Katzir)

In contrast to Lithuania, in Israel and Palestine, as Jewish historian Judith Tydor Baumel observes, within the early post-war years pivotal female figures of resistance, for instance the Zionist partisans like Rozka Korczak wrote their “resistance oriented” memoirs.¹⁹ Rozka Korczak as well as Brantsovskaya belonged to the FPO, however, after the war; she, differently than Brantsovskaya, has not stayed in Soviet Lithuania and moved to Israel. She served as an ambassador of the Holocaust memory and was the first

¹⁹ Judith Tydor Baumel, “Gender and Family Studies of the Holocaust: A Historiographical Overview,” in *Holocaust: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, ed. David Cesarani (New York: Routledge, 2004), 283.

partisan sent to Palestine to tell the story.²⁰ However, if Korczak has been in the centre of the memory of Jewish resistance, the other famous female partisan, her friend, Vitka Kempner-Kovner remained silent, although Kempner-Kovner was also responsible for the first act of sabotage against the Nazis in Lithuania. She fought, as a member of the FPO, in the forests of Rodniki and at seventeen she with her fellow partisans blew up a Nazi train.

After the war, Kempner-Kovner, together with other former partisans, in 1946 moved to live in kibbutz Ein Hahores, where she got married with Kovner and foremost in her life played the role of a wife. Their home was a place of meetings among different intellectuals. She also supported the literary career of her husband. However, she was unable to adapt to the routine activities of women in kibbutz, like sewing or working in the kitchen.²¹ Therefore, at the age of forty-five she decided to study and to become a clinical psychologist. However, as a partisan fighter, she came to the public light only after the deaths of her husband in 1987 and Korczak in 1988.

The coming out of Vitka Kempner-Kovner was very gradual. Firstly, in 2001, she appeared in the US documentary *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans*, where she, along with other partisans, remembers the resistance fight.²² However, in this documentary film Abba Kovner is seen not only in archival footage and historical photographs, but he also forms an important part in the interview setting with Kempner-Kovner. She gives an interview at her home, where behind her back, through the entire interview, one might observe, in the candle light, the black and white photograph of Abba Kovner (in Fig. 3). However, even though Kovner is visually shown in the shadow of Vitka Kempner-Kovner, he

²⁰ Rich Cohen, *The Avengers: A Jewish War Story* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 162.

²¹ Neima Barzel, "Vitka Kempner-Kovner," <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kempner-kovner-vitka>.

²² *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans*, dir. by Seth Kramer, 2001.

and his activities become the central topic of the documentary film and not the role of women in the Jewish partisan resistance.

Only in 2011, one year before her death at the age of 92, Kempner-Kovner becomes the central character of the documentary film. Israeli filmmaker Yael Katzir in 2011 created a film *I am talking now: Memoirs of a Partisan Woman*²³ that exclusively retells the life story of Vitka Kempner-Kovner (in Fig. 4). The film of Katzir is filmed at her home in kibbutz, however, in contrast to other documentary films about Vilna Jewish partisans, in this one, not Kovner or Korczak, but Vitka Kempner-Kovner is the main protagonist. This documentary film brings to the light her activities as a female partisan. She receives a voice of her own and turns to an active combater, and does not stay solely in the shadow of her husband. In the film, she states: "I was never concerned with wartime stories, while Abba and Rozka were alive, no one interviewed me. I never talked about it. It was a period that had ended." She claims that she could not retell the past as well as Kovner and Korczak did.

However, her uncertainty in remembering was challenged by the death of her lifelong compatriots. As Dori Laub writes, "survivors experience tragic life events not as mere catastrophes, but rather as the 'second Holocaust,' the ultimate victory of their cruel fate."²⁴ According to her, the "second Holocaust" becomes itself "a testimony to a history of repetition. Through its uncanny reoccurrence, the trauma of the second Holocaust bears witness not just to a history that has not ended, but, specifically, to the historical occurrence of an event that, in effect, does not end."²⁵ Thus Kempner-Kovner, through the loss of her spouse and her best friend Rozka Korczak, has experienced the return of trauma,

²³ *I Am Talking Now: Memoirs of a Partisan Woman*, dir. by Yael Katzir, 2011.

²⁴ Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

and at the same time re-experienced the traumatic events of her past again. Therefore, these traumatic losses might have become an important turning moment from which she started to recollect again her past traumas. Testifying in the documentary films gave her the possibility to speak out her pain and served as a certain form of therapy. Frank Stern, who analyzed gendered remembrances in Shoah films, claims that “film can be mnemo-amnesia – remembering to forget,” as he states “in order to forget one has to remember what to forget” and “in order to remember we need representations,” or “productive disremembering” and this is, according to him, is the function of cinema which is “the modern visual gesture of memory.”²⁶ Along with it, she might have felt the responsibility to continue the partisan narrative spread by Kovner and Korczak, and a documentary film became a perfect tool for recording this narration for coming generations.

Interpretations of Private Memories about the Vilna Ghetto Singer Liuba Levitska in the Film *Ghetto*: Possibilities and Limits of Cinematic Visualization

Holocaust feature films, in comparison with documentary, present a different approach to the Holocaust memory. Documentary films, as it was shown in the previous section, seek to present “objective” historical facts and “approach Holocaust sites as an archeological enterprise.”²⁷ Narrative films “shield the spectator from any sense of responsibility by aligning identification with the

²⁶ Frank Stern, “Remembering as Forgetting in Visual Culture: The Documentary Shades of Gender in Shoah Fiction,” in *Gendered Memories: Transgressions in German and Israeli Film and Theater*, ed. Vera Apfelthaler and Julia Köhne (Wien: Turia + Kant, 2007), 54.

²⁷ Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 7.

victims of the Nazi persecution.”²⁸ However, narrative film always has a “concern about preserving the dignity of Holocaust victims.”²⁹ Therefore, in this part of the work, I will analyze how private memories about the Vilna ghetto singer Liuba Levitska were interpreted in the first (and only) Lithuanian Holocaust narrative film *Ghetto*, directed by Lithuanian filmmaker Audrius Juzėnas.³⁰ This film is based on an award-winning Joshua Sobol play *Ghetto*.³¹ Sobol, who is often considered as the most renowned Israeli playwright, has also written a script for this film. The film *Ghetto*, through the voice of the female narrator, a famous ghetto singer Haya, retells violent events in the Vilna Ghetto (1942-1943), where around 15,000 Jews lived and later were executed.³² The film represents the 1941-1944 NS German occupation, which lasted from 1941 to 1944, and which was marked by the Holocaust. In 1941, the Vilna Ghetto was run by SS commander Bruno Kittel. In the ghetto, he meets a Jewish singer Haya. Kittel, fascinated by her singing capacities, decided to create a ghetto theater. In the meantime, Jews cannot understand this idea of entertainment in a place of mass killings. The function of the theater is to normalize daily life in the ghetto. The theater happens to be successful and is even used by Jews to express their animosity towards the Nazis in their plays.

Audrius Juzėnas, in the *Ghetto* description, claims that the film is based on authentic documents and represents a real story of the events that happened in the Vilna Ghetto. However, the authenticity thesis could be challenged. Lithuanian theater and cinema critic Rasa Vasiliauskaitė claims that “it is hard to understand how, after so many years, it is possible to create a film

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ The film was created in cooperation with the German filmmakers, who also supported financially its production.

³¹ The play *Ghetto* was premiered in 1984 at the Haifa Municipal Theater in Israel and in 1984 at the Freie Volksbühne in Berlin.

³² These numbers can be found in the following publication: Arūnas Bubnys, *Holokaustas Lietuvoje 1941-1944* (Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimų centras, 2011), 49.

by striking through new facts and memoirs published earlier, castrating real history and at the same time leaving real names of people in the film.”³³ Firstly, the film, as well as Sobol’s play, claims that the ghetto theater was created by Nazis, however, in the beginning NS officers were against the creation of a theater, and only later supported its existence.³⁴ According to Vasiliauskaitė, such a dogmatic interpretation eliminates the uniqueness of the ghetto theater, which should not be seen as a cultural action organized by the Nazis, but as a form of spiritual resistance organized by the ghetto prisoners.³⁵ Secondly, the play and the film referred to every single facet of Liuba Levitska’s life while creating the main character of the film Haya, however, as Vasiliauskaitė observes Haya “is rather a combined image embodying two different personalities.”³⁶ Moreover, in the film, in contrast to the play, most probably for commercial reasons, a sexual attraction story between Haya and Kittel is invented, even though these two people have never met each other in reality. The singer Liuba Levitska, at the time of Kittel’s arrival to the Vilna Ghetto, was already executed in Ponar.³⁷ The latter artistic interpretation raises a question where the borders among cinematic invention and authentic history and private memories should lie.

Thus it is necessary to observe how private memories about Liuba Levitska, who was mentioned almost in all published memoirs about the Vilna Ghetto, were visualized after many years and what such a representation allows us to conclude about cinema and its role in the formation of historical memory. American film scholar Robert A. Rosenstone states that film provides “an integrative image” and “history in film becomes what it most

³³ Rasa Vasiliauskaitė, “Was the Vilnius Ghetto Theater Unique?,” Lithuanian Film Center, 2006. <http://www.lfc.lt/en/Page=ArticleList&ID=4402>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ponar forest, next to Vilna, was the place, where the largest massacres of Jews took place.

centrally is: a process of changing social relationships where political and social questions and...all aspects of the past, including the language used are interwoven.”³⁸ Hence, this argumentation enables us to define historical films as real history or as a new kind of history.³⁹ Thus what kind of history is being written by the only Lithuanian Holocaust narrative film? What memory does it create about the famous Vilna Ghetto singer Liuba Levitska?

Levitska in the interwar period became a famous opera singer in Lithuania. In the Vilna Ghetto, she was one of the most notable personalities. She held concerts for the Ghetto prisoners. Levitska was mentioned almost in all ghetto diaries and memoirs. Her friend, librarian Ona Šimaitė, called her a “nightingale of the ghetto” and was devastated when found out about her death.⁴⁰ Later she published in a women’s worker magazine in Hebrew an article about her life, which was called “Liuba Levitska – Nightingale of the Ghetto.” Levitska was caught with peas, which she carried to her mother, by the chef of the ghetto. Firstly, she was imprisoned for a month in Lukiškės, then, in June 1943, executed in Ponar. Her story has been recounted many times, her personality could be also recognized in the novel *Stalemate* written by Lithuanian Jewish writer Icchokas Meras, which was published in 1968 and republished in 1998 and 2005.⁴¹ Literary scholar Julija Šukys has collected five different accounts about Levitska and each differs

³⁸ Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age,” in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick/New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 57.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ona Šimaitė, a Lithuanian librarian, used to enter the Vilna Ghetto recovering books from Jewish university students, however, under this pretext, she used to smuggle food into the Ghetto and rescue Jews. In 1944, she was arrested by Nazis, deported to Dachau concentration camp, later transferred to the concentration camp in the South of France, died in 1970 in Paris, France.

⁴¹ Julija Šukys, “Ona Šimaitė and the Vilnius Ghetto: An Unwritten Memoir,” *Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 54, no. 2 (2008). http://www.lituanus.org/2008/08_2_01%20Sukys.html.

slightly.⁴² The difference is usually connected to the details of the food she was smuggling into the ghetto: for instance, historian Arad writes she carried two pounds of grits, ghetto diarist Herman Kruk says beans, Yitskhok Rudashevski writes in his diary about peas, Hirsh Rolnikas focuses on the amount of peas, and Shoshana Kalish mentions only a small bag of food.⁴³ According to Šukys, such different accounts about her life shows her importance in the life of the Vilna Ghetto. She observes that:

The interest in these accounts lies not in pinning down exactly what Levitska was carrying on the day of her arrest; rather in the multiplicity that her story has taken on. The telling of Liuba Levitska's arrest has become a collective endeavour, but the collective story-telling does not result in a single, unified monument to her. Rather, the story explodes into a multiplicity of contradictory accounts. The slight variation in each telling of the story is the stone that each carrier brings to the cairn. It is the differences, the moments of memory lapses and shifts that make the story of Liuba Levitska's death a text of minor literature, and not a myth recited by heart.⁴⁴

The film *Ghetto* is also based on the life story of Liuba Levitska and starts with a scene where the protagonist Haya is caught with a bag of peas by the ghetto commander Kittel. However, in the film Haya is not executed, on the contrary, she not only survives the ghetto but also engages in a sexual relationship with Kittel, continues performing in the Vilna Ghetto theater, and even escapes to the forests as a Jewish partisan. Her figure becomes a mixture of both armed and spiritual resistance. Such a presentation of Levitska's life could be also understood as a way of showing her immortality and changing her destiny, turning her into an active ghetto fighter. A passionate relationship with the NS officer Kittel is also invented. Thus, Haya becomes a very complex character in

⁴² Julija Šukys, "Algiers – Vilnius – Algiers: A Study in Minor Literature," (doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 2001), 92. <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp05/NQ63611.pdf>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 92-93.

the film: from one side, she is presented as a ghetto victim and hero of spiritual, and later armed resistance, and on the other side, she is also portrayed as a collaborator with the Nazis because of her relationship with Kittel. The film director presents this relationship in his poster as “a passion in the shadow of death.” Through the entire film one might observe Kittel’s fascination with Haya: he is attracted to her both as a woman and as an artist. Kittel himself is a musician and plays a saxophone. He does not condemn her to death for the bag of peas that she was carrying in the ghetto; on the contrary, he turns her into the main actor and singer of the ghetto theater. This is the only episode in the film, where we can hear Haya talking about her relationship with Kittel:

Kittel: You are a great performer. Maybe one day we will dance and sing together.

Haya: I can’t wait for that day to come.

Kittel: Neither can I.

Haya: I will see you after the war.⁴⁵

In all other scenes, her “passion” is voiced through the demonstration of her body. One of the central scenes of the film is the so called voyeuristic “party” scene (see Fig. 2), which occurs after the episode, where Kittel and Jacob Gens, head of the ghetto administration, negotiate over the delay in the destruction of the Vilna Ghetto.⁴⁶ The voyeuristic scene is taking place in a theater and it represents an orgy of completely drunk *Wehrmacht* soldiers. NS officers are surrounded by Jewish women, who are forced to satisfy their sexual orders. Gens uses this atmosphere and Haya in order to save the Vilna Ghetto from liquidation. He offers Kittel to kill solely the 600 elderly ghetto prisoners, instead of 2000

⁴⁵ *Ghetto*, min. 48-49.

⁴⁶ Jacob Gens was until July 1942 head of *Judenrat*, after its dissolution, he was appointed by NS officers as a head of ghetto administration. His aim was to show that Jews could be productive in the ghetto, and, in this manner, he wanted to delay the destruction of the Vilna Ghetto. In September, 1943 he was killed by the Gestapo.

Jews. He saves the life of the ghetto Jews by using Haya and her body. During this episode, Gens removes her clothes and has her bare her breasts in front of Kittel (in Fig. 5). Haya has to please Kittel sexually.

This episode also includes the rape of other Jewish women and reveals the humiliation of their bodies (in Fig. 6). It involves the nudity of Jewish women in public. In this scene, we see Haya and other Jewish women from the ghetto, wearing fashionable dresses, and forcibly satisfying Nazi officers. The visual representation of these women reveals sexual violence prevailing in the ghetto. Also the moment when the main character Haya is filmed we might suspect that “the passion in the shadow of death” is actually a misleading description of the film. Haya is dancing with the Nazi officer Kittel, her eyes are full of fear when he touches and kisses her. However, in the case of the two main protagonists, the scene is ended without direct portrayal of the rape, and leaves the viewer with ambiguity. However, during the episode, there is no verbal mention of sexual violence. The narrator, Haya herself after many years, does not voice this traumatic experience, and neither Gens nor Kittel comments on it. In the moment, when Haya is being sexually harassed, Gens and Kittel discuss the destiny of the Vilna ghetto, where the female body becomes an object of negotiations.

Such forced action against a woman, when she allows her clothing to be removed and “exposing her person to the gaze of men with whom she had no familial or sexual relationship, was a crude and effective act of sexual violation.”⁴⁷ As Ni Aolain, who analyzes sex-based violence and Holocaust, claims that “nudity in a public context was abnormal and grotesque experience for these women, and the perpetrators understood that it would be experienced as such by them.”⁴⁸ These acts were public, in the case of this film,

⁴⁷ Fionnuala Ni Aolain, “Sexual Violence during the Holocaust – A Reevaluation of Harms and Rights in International Law,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 43 (2000): 10.

<http://www.law-lib.utoronto.ca/diana/fulltext/aola1.htm>.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

during “the party” scene. Such an expression of public gendered violence was a way “to demonstrate humiliation of the loser and the advantage of the victor.”⁴⁹ Moreover, the target was not only the women but also the community which surrounded her, parents, partners, children, and others. The goal was to cause harm to all of them. Thus, in the film *Ghetto*, Haya’s sexual contact with a NS officer is given with tacit consent, where her body becomes a tool for the head of the ghetto administration to save the lives of Jews.

However, it is important to observe that this film, which was also elected as the best Lithuanian cinema film in 2006, has been never publicly perceived through the perspective of sexual violence. Filmmakers did not openly problematize the issue of sexual violence not only in film but also in public space: for instance, during the screenings the issue of sexual violence against Jewish women during the Holocaust in Lithuania was left aside. Similarly, the Lithuanian Jewish community has criticized the misrepresentation of the memory of the famous Jewish singer Liuba Levitska, however, it too has not evoked the debate on the sexual violence during the Holocaust. Thus in this film female body became the catalyst of traumatic memory, however, this memory was obfuscated not only by the camera lens but also by the film director, who decided to hide sexual violence under a dramatic story of passion. In fact, such a common cinematic strategy to present sexual violence reveals the problematic of many Holocaust films, as violence against women, hidden from view, “creates a closed space very difficult to describe in words.”⁵⁰

Vasiliauskaitė in her critical article claims that this film’s genre could be called a “genre of Bordel.”⁵¹ She writes that “in the scenes of Bordel orgies, we see a character that has nothing to do with

⁴⁹ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁰ Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan, “Public Property: Sexual Abuse of Women and Girls in Cinematic Memory,” in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 246.

⁵¹ Vasiliauskaitė, “Was the Vilnius Ghetto Theater Unique?”

Levitska and insults her memory.”⁵² She also asked if “it is possible to represent the singer in this manner, knowing Levitska’s heroic stance in the ghetto, Lukiškės prison and Ponar, without stepping over the limits of morality and correctness.”⁵³ It is known that in real life Levitska has also experienced moments of sexual violence in the Vilna Ghetto, however, her perpetrators were not German officers but the Lithuanian ones. Her friend Šimaitė writes in her article about Haya:

After concerts in the ghetto I have experienced Liuba’s hospitality many times, stayed overnight at her place. One such night she told me how Lithuanian policemen were hunting her as a woman and what gigantic effort she needed to get free. A made-up story that she was infected with syphilis helped. Only Beecher Stowe’s quill can describe the spiritual suffering of Levitska. And she was happy that she managed to escape the bitterest fate for a woman.⁵⁴

This Šimaitė’s account about sexual violence against Liuba Levitska in the Vilna Ghetto is a rare exception in the history of the Holocaust. Till this day in Lithuania, none of the Jewish women have spoken about the sexual abuse they have experienced while living in the ghetto or as partisans hiding in the forests during the armed resistance. The Holocaust historian Zoe Waxman, who researched rape and sexual abuse in hiding, has observed that women who were hiding during the Holocaust were “on the margins of society, and this made them extremely vulnerable.”⁵⁵ She claims that Jewish women were abused not only by the Nazi officers but also “by their collaborators and by Jewish men in positions of power.”⁵⁶ However, many of these women did not voice their traumas

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Zoe Waxman, “Rape and Sexual Abuse in Hiding,” in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 124.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 125.

because they could not “relate their experiences in a context that insists that rape and sexual abuse do not belong to the history of the Holocaust,” or simply remained “imprisoned by memories that they cannot share.”⁵⁷

In order to understand why Levitska's biography was completely reinvented by the filmmakers, one has to remember the origins and context, in which the play, and later, film script emerged. The play *Ghetto* was shown in 1984, during the commemoration of 36 years of Israeli independence and, according to the German journalist and essayist Eike Geisel, *Ghetto* was not only about that specific ghetto.⁵⁸ In Sobol's play, Israel was also seen as a ghetto, which was divided in different camps, and filled with both heroes and betrayers.⁵⁹ Thus in the play, as well as in the film, it reflected not only the history of the Ghetto but also the actual history of Israel. Therefore, Haya is also a representation of different personalities, a singer, a partisan, and a collaborator. However, such cinematic modification of private memories about Liuba Levitska actually challenges the message of the film.

Rasa Vasiliauskaitė wrote: “I am surprised that this has happened in a film screened in 2006 that pretends to be the first feature film, a revelation of the history of the Vilnius Ghetto and its theater and is based on authentic documents.”⁶⁰ The film creates a completely new kind of history about her personality and surpasses the memoirs of former Vilna Ghetto prisoners. Such a deviation from the historical documents on the one hand might be seen as an artistic choice, but on the other hand, it reflects the ignorance and disrespect of filmmakers for the Jewish victims and their memories. Jewish literary scholar Alvin Rosenfeld claims that “all such

⁵⁷ Ibid., 128.

⁵⁸ Eike Geisel, “Die Fortzeugung der Zwangsgemeinschaft – Anmerkungen zur Aktualität des Ghettos,” in *Ghetto: Schauspiel in drei Akten. Mit Dokumenten und Beiträgen zur zeitgeschichtlichen Auseinandersetzung sowie Zeichnungen von Johannes Grätzke*, ed. Harro Schweizer (Berlin: Quadriga Verlag J. Severin, 1984), 216.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Vasiliauskaitė, “Was the Vilnius Ghetto Theater Unique?”

efforts at ‘adapting’ the Holocaust are bound to fail – artistically, for reasons of conceptual distortion, and morally, for misusing the suffering of others.”⁶¹ Thus cinema is paradoxical because it possesses both the “power of life and death” over the representing reality and collective memory.⁶² Next to supplementing collective memory, it also “acts as a source of societal amnesia.”⁶³ Thus cinema is not only a preserver and generator of private memories but also a producer of forgetting.

Fig. 5. Public nudity: Haya's body is publicly exposed to Kittel



Fig. 6. Rape scene



Source: *Ghetto* (LT/DE 2006, Director: Audrius Juzėnas).

This paper has shown that cinema and memory have a twofold relationship, namely, it evokes both the remembering and disremembering of private memories. Documentary filmmaking about Jewish partisans has shown the ways and forms of remembering traumatic pasts and inscribing these private memories into the public memory of the Holocaust. In the case of a former Jewish partisan, Fania, documentary films were the catalysts of public discussion, which firstly, caused rejection and condemnation of her past, however, afterwards, they managed to transform public understanding of the Jewish resistance during the Holocaust in Lithuania. Therefore, in this case, documentary film became “an important reality shaping communication,” which allowed the

⁶¹ Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 7.

⁶² Fuyuki Kurasawa, “Cinema, or an Art of Urban Memory in an Age of Forgetting,” *Public* 29 (2004): 29. <http://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/public/article/view/30355/27883>.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 35.

society to get acquainted with the Jewish resistance in Lithuania, then, through public discussions, these memories were shared in society with each other, and finally, a common understanding started to emerge.⁶⁴ Documentary filmmaking about Vitka Kempner-Kovner revealed that documentary films do not necessarily have to evoke wide ranging public discussions; however, they might have influenced the main protagonist of the film. Kempner-Kovner, for the first time, started to witness through documentary cinema: in other words, films gave her a chance to verbally perform her traumatic memories in front of the camera lens by presenting herself in everyday life. In the documentary film, she was allowed to adopt any role she wanted, she was no longer solely a wife of a famous partisan fighter and poet, but she became an important actor of the Jewish resistance.

In contrast, the Lithuanian Holocaust film *Ghetto* has shown that cinema also possesses a power of forgetting. The universalized and changed private memories of ghetto singer Liuba Levitska have shown the limits of cinematic interpretation of the past. Liuba Levitska's destiny was known to all survivors from the Vilna Ghetto through the memoirs and testimonies of different Holocaust witnesses, her memory became part of their memory. However, the film has chosen to reinvent her life and experiences during the Holocaust. It has raised a question where are the boundaries in Holocaust cinema when dealing with private memories. Hungarian writer Imre Kertesz has claimed that private Holocaust memories should not become the "exclusive property" of Holocaust survivors and the aim should not be "preserving the vital memory" of the Holocaust.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, while analyzing the invented life of Liuba Levitska, one has to agree that in any interpretations of the private memories should be aimed at preserving the dignity of the Holocaust victim.

⁶⁴ Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

⁶⁵ Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 8.

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Gendering the Cultural Memory of the Holocaust: A Comparative Analysis of a Memoir and a Video Testimony by Olga Lengyel

EDIT JEGES

“What is remembered of the Holocaust depends on how it is remembered, and how events are remembered depends in turn on the texts now giving them form.”
James E. Young

This paper explores the question how is the cultural memory of the Holocaust characteristic to the 1940s and to the 1990s gendered through the comparative analysis of a memoir and a video testimony by the same survivor Olga Lengyel, focusing on her accounts of gendered experiences during the Holocaust. Attention will be paid both to elements of continuity and change in the cultural memory of the Holocaust produced in her recollection published in 1947 in book format and in her video testimony from 1998 on the Shoah Foundation's Visual History online archive.¹ It will be suggested that the generic approach to written and oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors does not suffice to account for the difference in

¹ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys* (London: Grafton, 1989); originally published in 1947. Olga Lengyel, Interview number 46138, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation's Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, 1998.

the narrated gendered experiences, since the changing discourses on gender and the Holocaust need to be taken into account. The cultural memory of the Holocaust relied mainly on memoirs and other autobiographical, written accounts of the genocide in the decades following the Second World War, however, after the 1990s there was a turn towards digital sources as the main types of sources shaping the cultural memory. Some scholars even suggest that the video testimony is the genre specifically suited to the narration of Holocaust testimonies.² This paper investigates whether this shift towards a preference for digital, multimedia products was accompanied by a change in the gendered characteristic of the cultural memory of the Holocaust as well.³

Olga Lengyel's memoir is exemplary of the ways in which the written accounts by survivors published right after the war stirred international discussion as to the authenticity of the Holocaust (whether and how it had actually happened) as it was one of the first published "eyewitness accounts" on the genocide, establishing certain tropes of authentication; for instance, the appearance of Dr. Mengele in survivor accounts.⁴ The international interest in Lengyel's memoir can also be ascribed to her involvement in the camp resistance movement in that she could provide valuable

² Simone Gigliotti, "Technology, Trauma, and Representation: Holocaust Testimony and Videotape," in *Temporalities, Autobiography, and Everyday Life*, eds. Jan Campbell and Janet Harbord (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 204-218.

³ Sara R. Horowitz, "Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory," *Prooftexts* 21, nos. 1-2 (2000): 158-190. See especially p. 169. The cultural memory of the Holocaust can be considered as gendered in the sense that Holocaust literature represents the genocide in a gender-specific way. Sara Horowitz argues that the survivors represent the atrocity in their works by applying the trope of gender reversal as a paradigmatic example of dehumanization. Horowitz argues that in Holocaust literature narrative choices utilize ideas or norms about gender, especially in that the undoing of the self during atrocity in Jewish culture is associated with emasculation or defeminization through the reversal of traditional gender roles.

⁴ William Styron, "A Wheel of Evil Come of Full Circle: The Making of *Sophie's Choice*," *The Sewanee Review* 105, no. 3 (1997): 395-400.

details of the organization of camp life and the organization of resistance in the Auschwitz camp. Moreover, her video testimony recorded in 1998 (thus half a century later than her memoir) by the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive has a special status in the collection. Although the main policy of the archive is to publish their material consisting of 52,000 interviews for educational purposes, to make them available to high school students and scholars at certain access points, they have a collection consisting of a few hundred testimonies on a YouTube channel available to the wider public, without any restriction. Lengyel's testimony is available in its entirety on this YouTube channel. Thus, due to its public status, it can be considered as contributing to the cultural memory of the Holocaust.

The analysis will be structured by the three following questions. How does the survivor represent herself as a witness in the memoir and in the video testimony? It serves the purpose of pointing out the gendered expectations that come into play in the construction of the category of the reliable witness, since the default position of the survivor was the male perspective in the canon of Holocaust literature.⁵ Moreover, how are examples of gender norms narrated in the memoir and in the video testimony? It helps to point out that the framing of gender norms is different in the two materials, the moralizing tone is less prevalent in the video testimony than in the memoir. Finally, in what context is the question of gender norms raised in the testimony and in the memoir? It leads us to the contrastive analysis of the gradual dehumanization of camp inmates narrated in a gender-stereotypical manner in the memoir and Lengyel's childhood experiences, narrated, on the other hand, in a more subversive manner in the video testimony.

So far I have emphasized the generic shift from the autobiographical writing to video testimonies as a primary site of witnessing and a source of the cultural memory of the Holocaust.

⁵ Anna Reading, *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust: Gender, Culture, and Memory* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002); see especially the chapter "The 'Wrong' Question: Historiographies," 29-50.

However, it is only one of the four factors that need to be taken into account when assessing the similarities and differences in the gendered cultural memory produced and disseminated by the two works. First, the different genres influence the arising narratives as the autobiographical narratives need to be “compatible with” existing accounts of survival, while the video testimonies are shaped by the dialogic relationship, the arising “intersubjectivity” between interviewer and interviewee.⁶ Second, the discourses on the Holocaust changing over time influence the narratives, and discourses on gender norms also filter into the representations of the genocide through gendered imagery. Third, the different purposes of the two works need also be taken into account, since the purpose of the memoir was to inform the public about the horror of the atrocity (as it is reflected by Lengyel’s initial title *I Survived Hitler’s Ovens*), whereas the purpose of the video testimony is educational, more specifically, raising public awareness of racism. Finally, in this analysis of two personal stories of the same survivor focusing on gender norms and the changing discourses on the Holocaust, the survivor’s life trajectory and her subjectivity needs to be taken into account.

This comparative paper engages in the debate on the application of video testimonies for studies on the Holocaust, especially in focusing on the element of comparison with literary works. Lawrence Langer in his groundbreaking study of video testimonies *The Ruins of Memory* emphasizes the different temporality and immediacy of the oral testimony as compared to autobiographical works, in which layers of mediations might distract the researcher. Regarding Lengyel’s memoir and video testimony the different chronology of the narratives, the narrative voice reflecting the facticity or the chaotic nature of the Holocaust respectively and the conclusions underlining the future message of the survivor

⁶ Zoe Waxman, “Unheard Testimony, Untold Stories: The Representation of Women’s Holocaust Experiences,” *Women’s History Review* 12, no. 4 (2003): 661–677; Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); see especially “Narrative,” 106–130.

constitute vital aspects of this comparison. Young points to the forms of silences as the main difference between written and video testimonies, in that the recorded testimony centers on survivors' search for words, as he says, the video testimony consists of the "literal making of the witness."⁷ This concept informs my analysis of Lengyel's video testimony paired with an attention to the intersubjective relation between the survivor and the interviewer.

Lengyel establishes herself as a reliable witness in her memoir through the tone of her narration and her emphases on her moral standing and respectable femininity. First, Lengyel adapts a factual tone in her memoir – indeed, hers is considered to be among the most "artless" eyewitness accounts ever published – through structuring her narrative by references to historical events during and after the war, including the war criminals' trials.⁸ She also relies on eyewitness accounts on camp activities that she did not participate in (for instance, in the forced labor in gas chambers, crematoria, and in the Canada warehouse⁹) and statistics on the transports that were available to her because of her involvement in the Auschwitz underground organization. Second, from the beginning of her memoir she emphasizes her role as a wife, when referring to her husband's occupation, surgery, Lengyel explains that she helped him as a surgical assistant in the hospital and brought "to its [the hospital's] décor a woman's love for color."¹⁰ In other words, she emphasizes a traditional aspect of femininity, homemaking, instead of emphasizing that she together with her husband built a new hospital with the financial support of her parents or that she gained a university degree in literature, both pieces of information are mentioned in her video testimony.

⁷ James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 161.

⁸ Patricia A. Gartland, "Three Holocaust Writers: Speaking the Un-speakable," *Critique* 25, no. 1 (1983): 48.

⁹ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*; see especially chapters 11 "Canada," and 12 "The Morgue."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

Moreover, Lengyel underlines her strong commitment to her family in that she decided to follow her husband to the deportation with their children so that the family could stay together.¹¹ In so doing Lengyel introduces herself as a traditionally feminine wife, who can be considered as a reliable witness to the Holocaust.

Third, from the first sentence of her memoir Lengyel emphasizes the responsibility she feels for the death of her mother and son, which she thinks she facilitated by encouraging the Nazi guard to select them to the left row upon their arrival to the Auschwitz camp, thus condemning them to immediate death. By underlining this fatal “mistake” she made relying on her belief in the “German morals,”¹² which would respect the old and the children, she acknowledges her community with other inmates who committed similar mistakes.¹³ Morality appears as a main theme in her memoir, inextricably linked with her perception of femininity. Although Lengyel underlines that her perspective is not one of a moralist, in that she does not judge her fellow inmates who were degraded to “organization” or downright stealing from other camp inmates. Nevertheless, Lengyel reflects on the gradual degradation of morals among the inmates, which she perceives to be a result of their infection with “Nazi morals.” The moral stamina of camp inmates as a theme is woven through the narration of the memoir especially in the discussion of intimate relations between camp inmates, including Lengyel’s reflection on her own experiences and her fellow inmates’ behavior, which will be discussed later.

Lengyel in her memoir published right after the war narrates her gendered experiences in what appears as a strikingly sincere manner, starting from her initiation into the camp, through the everyday threat and temptation of bargaining sex for food with male inmates to the practice of murdering newborns in order to save the mothers’

¹¹ Ibid., 16.

¹² Ibid., 27.

¹³ On a psychological level this can be explained by the much-analyzed concept “survivor guilt” that characterizes testimonies by Holocaust survivors.

lives. Regarding her initiation into camp life, Lengyel narrates that during the removal of the newly arrived inmates' hair, a Nazi guard ordered not to have her hair clipped. Lengyel was contemplating the chances of "better treatment" that the sparing of her hair might entail, which, she concluded, could only be achieved at an "ugly price."¹⁴ Therefore, she disobeyed the Nazi guard's order and returned to the line to have her hair cut. Although it is not explained what exactly Lengyel meant by the "ugly price," it can be interpreted as a reference to the threat of sexual violence or exploitation especially given that later in the memoir (upon describing the everyday details of camp life) Lengyel discusses the "ordinary phenomenon" of prostitution in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex. Lengyel includes in the category of prostitution both the prostitutes of the camp administration and the survival strategy of female inmates which consisted of using their sexuality as a "coin"¹⁵ in bartering for food with the male camp inmates.¹⁶

Lengyel devotes a chapter "Accursed Births" to the everyday dilemma women, especially the nurses of the infirmary, faced whether or not to "condemn the newborn to death in order to save the poor mothers."¹⁷ In so doing, she reflects on the phenomenon that despite the orders, some deportations included pregnant women especially in their first trimesters and also on the phenomenon that some women became pregnant during their stay in the concentration camp. Apart from this historical aspect of her account, Lengyel reflects on a specifically gendered experience, that of pregnancy, and the specifically gendered "choice" which women inmates faced, including her detailed insights that only a practitioner working in the camp infirmary could provide.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵ Ibid., 190.

¹⁶ This phenomenon of bartering "sex for food" among the camp inmates Kristy Chatwood termed "sex for survival," which concept departs from any moral connotations attached to intimate contact during the Holocaust so prevalent in Lengyel's analysis.

¹⁷ Ibid., 72.

The representation of moral deterioration during the Holocaust in Lengyel's memoir can be characterized by gender and class imagery. Although she does not explicitly reflect on her class status in her memoir, she interprets her experiences of dehumanization in terms of the loss of class pride and the deterioration of social structure in terms of the demolition of class barriers. She describes the trip in the cattle car to Auschwitz as a moral deterioration of fellow Jewish travelers who were "of culture and position from our community"¹⁸ into a dehumanized state (although at this level acts of compassion still occurred). In her discussion of camp life she repeatedly returns to the example of a "fine, intelligent woman" drinking from a puddle to quench her thirst like a dog.¹⁹ This example signals the intersection of class and gender in her understanding of dehumanization, which becomes explicit in her examples of reversals of social status when reflecting on the camp hierarchy. The examples of a former professor becoming the slave of her former hairdresser, now SS soldier²⁰ and the ex-millionairess becoming a thief under the circumstances of extreme deprivation²¹ both point to Lengyel's depiction of the atrocity in terms of deterioration of social, especially class standards. Although Lengyel generally emphasizes her moral stamina, especially through her resistance to courtship in the camp, she acknowledges an instance when she was bribed for food to signal the difficulty of keeping one's moral standards.

Lengyel's representation of the Holocaust through gender imagery becomes especially apparent in her discussion of intimate contact between inmates, which provides context to her reflection on gender norms.²² Lengyel devotes a separate chapter

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Ibid., 41 and 57.

²⁰ Ibid., 127.

²¹ Ibid., 107.

²² Lengyel also reflects on her personal experience by describing two courtships, the gentle attempts of a Polish former university professor, Tadek and the ardent attempts of a Polish countess, a lesbian. Lengyel introduces her admirer by contrasting the "animalistic concert of misery" of her

to the discussion of intimate relations in the concentration camp, entitled "Love in the Shadow of the Crematory," which begins with the assertion: "Nature dictates that wherever men and women are together, there shall always be love."²³ The relations to be described, however, are not characterized by Lengyel as "natural," quite the contrary, these conducts happened in an "abnormal society" where there was an absence of social conventions (including class relations, as discussed earlier). Following the assertion on the omnipresence of love between men and women, Lengyel describes three categories of female "perverts,"²⁴ based on her observation. The concept of the lesbian is applied to describe the first category of female inmates as "perverts," who had arrived in the camp already as lesbians. The second category consists of women who changed "their sexual viewpoint"²⁵ in the camp, often because of necessity. Finally, according to Lengyel, the third category of inmates became lesbians because of "corruption" during the "dance soirees"²⁶ organized by the inmates themselves during the long winter nights of 1944. These parties Lengyel considers to be parodies of the life her fellow inmates enjoyed before the war, consisting of a type of entertainment that ultimately resulted in the formation of couples, imitating male and female roles. Despite acknowledging that these

fellow inmates with his kind, human voice that brought her relief. Tadek's "fine style of lovemaking" consisted of comforting her, providing her with food, and even a shawl (61). In the chapter dedicated to "perverse" forms of love in the concentration camp, to be discussed later, Lengyel describes another courtship by a Polish countess, a lesbian who was cross-dressing as a man even before having entered the camp. The countess' style of love-making was not so "gentlemanly," one might infer, since she continuously hid in Lengyel's bed and attacked her with her kisses so that Lengyel had eventually to run away from her. This caricature-like description contrasts with the realistic heterosexual courtship, which was appealing to her reason and hunger. A comparison of these courtships might shed further light on the gendered representation of the genocide.

²³ Ibid., 189.

²⁴ Ibid., 191-192.

²⁵ Ibid., 191.

²⁶ Ibid., 192-193.

events provided some distraction from the experiences of the camp, she describes them with disgust. Although it can be inferred that Lengyel expresses homophobia especially through her view of homosexuality as perversion, a moral deterioration and a disease, a careful reading of her memoir reveals a more positive interpretation of intimate contact between women that Lengyel provides through the description of one of her close friends.

In the chapter "Our Private Lives" dedicated to the description of the infirmary personnel, the five women with whom Lengyel was working and sharing a room, she describes her most interesting companion, Dr. G. the following way:

She was a doctor from Transylvania, who, to an extent that was *positively unhealthy*, refused to reconcile herself to the fact that she was no longer living her old life of pre-Auschwitz days. Every evening she informed us that the blocova had invited her to tea, and described the incident as though it were one of those *elegant tea parties* she had known before. We knew what the "tea party" had been. What kind of tea could anyone have in this place? But the doctor insisted upon embellishing and glamorizing everything about her. Thus she lived in *a separate world of her own creation*.²⁷

Three aspects of this characterization of Dr. G. stand out: she behaves in an unhealthy manner; she participates in what are described as tea parties and she creates for herself a separate dream world. Importantly, the use of the adjective "unhealthy" does not refer to her possibly intimate relationship with another woman but to her unwillingness of concentrating on or even acknowledging the horrors of the camp life. It can be assumed that her relation with the blocova was a relationship based on sexuality in return for privileges, given that Dr. G. had plenty of dresses and even her own "maid." Therefore, it is a relationship similarly based on exploitation and necessity, which Lengyel describes in the chapter "Love in the Shadow of the Crematory," however, Lengyel does not make a connection to lesbianism "out of necessity." Neither does

²⁷ Ibid., 141; emphases added.

she link her friend's behavior to the practice of the "dance soirees," to lesbianism through "corruption," although the denomination "tea party" would signal similar (and similarly classed) connotations. On the contrary, Lengyel emphasizes the imaginary nature of the relationship instead of its physicality or the materiality of the privileges and she emphasizes the creativity of Dr. G. in the form of creating a dream world that was entirely "unreal." Thus, it can be suggested that for Lengyel a relatively fulfilling same-sex relationship between women is only conceivable on the plane of the imaginary, the unreal.

Moreover, Lengyel associates her friend with general positive attitude that gave strength to others, especially her "intense femininity" made them laugh.²⁸ The femininity of Dr. G. manifested itself in her dress collection and the exaggerated attention she attached to it, especially in the episode of her childlike grief over losing one piece of clothing and skipping meals for a day. This episode describes the overly feminine, almost parodic lesbian who as a spectacle makes the atmosphere for her fellow inmates cheerier, countering the stereotypical account of lesbians as lacking creativity. More importantly, I suggest that Lengyel describes her friend Dr. G. in a positive light despite her disapproval of the intimate relations between women because Dr. G. was abiding gender norms, although overdoing them. The other female camp inmates described as lesbians were probably "guilty of" crossing the line of morality according to Lengyel because of their neglect of gender norms. In this sense, "gender reversal as a trope of the genocide" characterizes Lengyel's narrative.

Lengyel's Video Testimony or 51 Years After

After having discussed Lengyel's memoir focusing on the three main points, her self-establishment as a reliable witness, her narration of gendered experiences during the Holocaust and the gender and class imagery of her representation, I interpret these themes

²⁸ Ibid., 145.

in her video testimony. As it was pointed out at the beginning of this analysis of Lengyel's memoir, she applies a factual tone in her narration, which is characterized by chronological linearity and structured by references to main historical events. In her video testimony, however, she emphasizes her difficulties in describing the horrible events, her search for words, as she puts it several times, "I can't even describe the scene" because it was so abnormal, inconceivable.²⁹ Similarly, Lengyel stresses the lack of sense of time that they suffered in the camp, by referring to the lack of watches and the deteriorated state of the natural environment that made it impossible to make sense of the passage of time. In other words, a feeling of disorientation and chaos is recalled in her video testimony, whereas in her memoir every major event in the camp life, even the everyday experiences of roll calls are documented by exact references to time.

In her video testimony Lengyel underlines the fragmented knowledge the inmates had of the camp as a whole, since they only experienced a small segment of the utter hell (the power dynamics of one barrack and of a certain place of forced labor) and they could not have any access to a systematic understanding of the functioning of the camp complex. Contrary to this, her later knowledge of the system of the camp, including statistics and detailed eyewitness accounts, influences her narration in her memoir, in which she attempts to provide an overall depiction of the camp based on her personal insights into the infirmary service and the resistance movement. Therefore, it can be deduced that Lengyel's mode of narration in both works follows the generic expectations in that the audience encounters the factual "survivor-scribe" in the memoir and the "literal making of the witness" in the video testimony.³⁰ In other words, the difference

²⁹ Lengyel, Interview number 46138, segment 14.

³⁰ Young coins the expression "survivor-scribe" to describe the survivors' technique of authentication, which refers to the need to efface their subjectivity, to exclude any references to their personal experiences from their memoirs and instead to provide factual, chronologically linear ac-

in the mode of narration Lengyel applies in her memoir written in 1947, and her video testimony in 1998, can be ascribed to the characteristics of the respective genres. Apart from the factual tone of narration, two other methods of authentication – the emphasis on respectable femininity and moral stamina – were analyzed in Lengyel's memoir. It is vital to specify that the accentuation of her femininity refers to her respectable femininity, ascribing to the contemporary gender norms, manifesting itself in certain silences. For instance, Lengyel does not include any reflection on her feminine beauty, which might denounce some commonality with the violated "beautiful girls," throwing the shadow of suspicion on her.³¹ In her video testimony, however, she recalls her naturally beautifully shaped eyebrows, which contributed to her vulnerability in the camp.

Although Lengyel's narrative in the video testimony is influenced by her class status differently than her account of dehumanization in her memoir, class features as a prominent characteristic of representation in both accounts. First, her class status in 1998 becomes apparent to the viewer in the visual component of the interview. The viewer of Lengyel's video testimony is presented with a very elegant elderly woman dressed in a white costume with golden buttons in a room where the background consists of a piano, an antique vase and a cushion, most likely made of brocade. In a word, both the appearance and the surroundings of the survivor are luxurious, which certainly provides an additional element to the "overall text" of the

counts, see James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

³¹ Lengyel stresses the beauty of female inmates who were subjected to sexual violence and exploitation, which has been analyzed by scholars as a commonly applied stereotype "only beautiful girls were raped." Monika J. Flaschka, "'Only Pretty Women Were Raped': The Effect of Sexual Violence on Gender Identities in Concentration Camps," in *Sexual Violence*, eds. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 77-93.

testimony particularly in that it reflects the Lengyel's belonging to the higher social strata.³²

Second, Lengyel's class status intersects with the perception of femininity before the Second World War, which provides Lengyel the opportunity to embrace activities outside the home (such as participation in charity organizations), and at the same time to fulfill the expectations of her family. During the first question block, dedicated to the pre-war experiences and family life of the survivor Lengyel recounts two single stories in which she reflects on the traditional views on femininity at the time and recalls her disregard for these norms. The interviewer inquires whether Lengyel had any dolls as a little girl, to which she replies: "I had a few dolls but since I was the only child who happened to be a girl there was responsibilities towards the family fortune, they needed somebody who could manage it, I was treated like a boy. I was seated at my father's meetings to learn from an early age how to manage."³³ Thus, the question about childhood toys, more specifically dolls, prompts the survivor to reflect on contemporary gender norms on raising a girl and how these gender norms were affected by the class status of the family. Moreover, she recalls that as a child she wanted to buy a beautiful Omega watch that she had seen in the jeweler's shop window, which in spite of being a men's wristwatch, her father eventually bought her. Lengyel's narrative of the purchase of the Omega watch can be treated as a metaphor of the intersection of gender and class in that the financial standing of her family enabled her to participate in activities that were considered more "manly" at the time.

³² Young, *Writing and Rewriting*.

³³ Lengyel, Interview number 46138, segment 2. Interviewers of the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive often ask questions about childhood toys, in the case of girls the question concerns dolls. According to the Interviewer Guidelines, the volunteer interviewers are trained to ask topical questions, in which "the range of topics is broad, yet specific to each individual" (Interviewer Guidelines, 8). One might infer that in some cases, however, the questions are specific to the survivor's gender.

These reflections on her family background and childhood experiences are not present in her memoir, partly because the genre of the memoir has a specific temporality, it deals with a restricted time period and the majority of memoirs published right after the Holocaust concentrated on the war years.³⁴ More importantly, however, it can be inferred that Lengyel introduces herself in the beginning of her video testimony as an assertive woman, who even as a child aspired to expand the confines of the traditional feminine role model, yet, at the same time remained within the limits of what was considered to be respectable for a woman in her standing. In contrast, Lengyel remains silent about these aspirations that could have been considered less acceptable in her memoir. She emphasizes her role as a daughter and a wife by upholding the cohesion of the family, which ironically in the metamorphosed world of the camp turned her into the tormentor of her family, who contributed to their murder. By depicting herself in a traditionally feminine role and remaining silent about the “liberties” that she enjoyed compared to her female contemporaries of lower social standing, Lengyel emphasizes the assault on humanity the Nazis committed. Consequently, the cultural memory of the Holocaust that is disseminated by her memoir, the depiction of atrocity is communicated within the framework of traditional gender order, in which Lengyel chose not to include any reflection on her privileges as an upper-class woman.

Lengyel discusses her gendered experiences in the video testimony differently than in her memoir, without a moralizing tone and any personal reflection. The topic of the treatment of pregnant women – including the induced abortions and the murder of newborn babies, which are discussed in detail in her memoir – is only mentioned in passing. In fact, the interviewer having read Lengyel’s memoir, thus being familiar with her personal

³⁴ Judith Tydor Baumel, “‘You Said the Words You Wanted Me to Hear but I Heard the Words You Couldn’t Bring to Yourself to Say’: Women’s First Person Accounts of the Holocaust,” *The Oral History Review* 27, no. 1 (2000): 29.

experiences and moral dilemmas concerning the “accursed births” asks a specific question about the treatment of pregnant women – a question, however, which elicits a very short, factual response from Lengyel. She summarizes that in cases when the pregnancy became known, the women were hanged, in cases when one succeeded to conceal one’s pregnancy, “some doctor assisted the birth but the baby was killed right away.”³⁵ Thus, by referring to the camp legislation and some doctors’ participation in the deliveries, Lengyel dismisses any personal involvement with either cases of pregnant women or the disposal of newborns. Instead, she shortly mentions the experimentation on female camp inmates, finally to arrive at a topic she discusses in detail: prostitution. Lengyel recalls that she visited the Auschwitz camp twice after the war and narrates her experience in detail of being guided through the camp by “a very nice librarian, a lady,” who had showed her the administrative building, including several strange rooms with smaller rooms attached to them and a door in-between containing small peek-through holes. Lengyel was to learn that this place had been used for prostitution for the exclusive use of the Nazi guards and the camp administration, finishing her account by asking the interviewer: “Did you ever hear about it? Because they don’t tell it usually.”³⁶

Three observations can be deduced from this single story about prostitution in the Auschwitz camp, regarding the personal development of the narrator, the relation between the interviewer and survivor and the topics of gendered experiences discussed in the memoir and in the video testimony. First, it can be observed that Lengyel cannot be characterized by the retelling of a similar set of stories, or even the very same stories that have been published, or by reading out parts of her own recollection that have been published earlier. Second, by drawing attention to Lengyel’s question to the interviewer it can be pointed out that, generally speaking, the relation between interviewer and interviewee influences the

³⁵ Lengyel, Interview number 46138, segment 29.

³⁶ Ibid., segment 49.

narrative of the testimony, more specifically, that Lengyel narrates her experiences that were not included in her memoir to provide her primary audience – her interviewer with new accounts of the Holocaust.³⁷ Third, it can be suggested that Lengyel provides an account of her experiences that are still considered to be rather taboo topics in discussions of the Holocaust, such as the case of prostitution. As it was analyzed earlier in this paper, Lengyel addressed the topic of intimate contact between camp inmates, a topic pertaining to the field of sexuality in her memoir. The topic of sexuality has only recently gained more in-depth scholarly attention from gender-sensitive scholars of the Holocaust, with the case of prostitution still being a somewhat risqué area of attention. Therefore, it can be concluded that both in her memoir and in her video testimony Olga Lengyel explores some areas of the Holocaust with pioneering sincerity that were at the time or even in the present-day Holocaust studies are considered to be taboo topics.

The difference between video and literary testimonies, following Young, can be characterized by the forms of silences and the roles of conclusion. In the video testimony, Lengyel does not discuss the inmates' intimate relations in Auschwitz, her reflection on lesbianism is reduced to a sketch of survivor groups and the question concerning her private life after the war elicits a literal 30-second silence. Regarding the conclusions, the concluding chapter and the concluding segments differ in their content and their mode of narration. Lengyel finishes her memoir by recalling the last assault of the Nazi soldiers in the form of a forced march

³⁷ This analysis took into consideration the interconnection between Olga Lengyel and her interviewer especially in the reflection on the question concerning childhood toys, discussed earlier. Additionally, the comments on Lengyel's video testimony on the YouTube channel might have been taken into account, according to which the interviewer acts in a rude manner, her questions seek facticity without following up the survivor's narration.

and narrating a moving story of her successful escape together with some of her friends. Finally, she concludes her memoir with a reflection on her freedom, full of expectations, reiterating her belief in human dignity, which was not shattered despite her experience of the genocide.

In contrast, the recollection of her Holocaust experience in the video testimony does not end with this heroic story, but with her recollection of the experience with the “troupe de choc,” the soldiers of the liberating Red Army. Lengyel frames her narrative of this single story by emphasizing that the shock troop, were “the outcast of any nation,”³⁸ not representatives of the Red Army *per se*, only to recall her fight with a soldier “whose motives were evident” and her escape with only a scar on her wrist, as the soldier had bit off her wristwatch.³⁹ Upon hearing this story, without any reaction to it, the interviewer asks the question “when did you know that you were liberated, that you were really free?” to which Lengyel summarizes the behavior of the Russian soldiers in the village on the first day of liberation, suggesting that freedom did not arrive with their liberation.⁴⁰ As compared to her memoir, Lengyel does not end her recollection of the Holocaust with a reflection on freedom and her faith in humankind, but reflects on her experience with the liberating Red Army. Thus, I suggest that Lengyel explores a topic that was not deemed suitable for publication at the time, which is still a sensitive topic in discussions of the Holocaust that needs to be framed by references to the exceptionality of certain soldiers’ violent behavior.

Olga Lengyel’s video testimony differs from her memoir in several aspects: the strategies of authentication, the narration of gendered memories, and the representation of the Holocaust in gender and class imagery. The difference in the authentication of the testimonies can be ascribed to the respective genres, the authenticity of the narratives is established by facticity in the memoir

³⁸ Ibid., segment 37.

³⁹ Ibid., segment 38.

⁴⁰ Ibid., segment 38.

and the “literal making of the witness” in the video testimony. The change in the gendered memories that are narrated can be attributed to the changing cultural memory of the Holocaust, although Lengyel explores topics that are yet marginal to historical analysis. The difference in the gendered representation of the Holocaust can be interpreted by the intersubjectivity of the interview in that Lengyel does not reflect on gender relations during the Holocaust in the video testimony. However, the representation of the Holocaust with class imagery is an important element of continuity in her testimonies, which is an aspect of survivor testimonies that needs detailed attention in further research. This paper contributed to the re-reading of an established work of the Holocaust canon that shaped the cultural memory of the Holocaust and the understanding of the gendered aspect of Holocaust literature not only by a careful reading of the text to explore its inconsistencies, but also by a comparison with a more contemporary version of the testimony by the same survivor. The shift in the main media of the cultural memory of the Holocaust, from literary works to digital testimonies, calls for similar re-evaluations of the gendered aspect of the cultural memory transmitted by survivors.

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